



Nikos Gabriel Pentzikis

HOMAGE TO BYZANTIUM

*The Life and Work of
Nikos Gabriel Pentzakis*

By

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Theofanis G. Stavrou, *General Editor*

Cover and frontispiece photograph of Nikos Gabriel Pentzikis
Jacket flap photograph of George Thaniel

*To Edward Phinney,
true friend of Greece*

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GEORGE THANIEL

George Thaniel was born and raised in Greece and received his first university degree in literature from the University of Athens. He has been a resident of Canada since 1964 and earned his M.A. and Ph.D. in Classics at McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario. In 1971 he was assigned the task of organizing and teaching a program of Modern Greek Studies at the University of Toronto, Department of Classics, where he is now associate professor. In 1978–1979 Mr. Thaniel was awarded the Norwood travel prize and spent several months in Italy for purposes of research and study. He has written articles on Classical subjects but most of his published work is in the area of modern Greek literature: a book on the Greek-Canadian writer Nikos Kachtitsis, essays and reviews in many journals. Mr. Thaniel is also a poet, published in both Greek and English.

PREFACE

The life and work of the Greek writer Nikos Gabriel Pentzikis is in many ways a refreshing as well as disturbing contrast to what is normally expected from artists and writers by North American readers. The Western world in general and North America in particular are noted for their aggressive progression into the future, and for faith in the unlimited capacity of human beings to conquer the environment and chart the inner universe. Pentzikis, on the other hand, seems to belong in a world oriented toward the past. His literary work shows a Protean character and bold experimentation with style. It rests, however, on Christian faith, and more particularly Greek Orthodox faith. Its premise is that man is not an independent and self-reliant being but one who cannot act or even exist without the protection and guidance of God and his Saints venerated in a multitude of icons. In a modern technological society which has placed man on the moon, has photographed Mars, and taken the temperature of Venus, pious intellectuals like Pentzikis might seem out of place. Yet the dictum of Leibnitz "All is for the better in the best world possible" can be questioned now. After two world wars and continuing social and political unrest, humankind has lost some of its self-confidence. Many turn to religion, exotic as well as traditional religions. Evangelism makes new converts, and among the followers of Indian gurus one finds distinguished scholars as well as former Bohemians. Spiritual anxieties equally disturb the sleep of the humble and the prominent. One could cite among the latter Dag Hammarskjöld, the late Secretary General of the United Nations, whose personal diary published posthumously under the title *Markings* is a case in point. Pentzikis is a voice from the East, and the West has often throughout its history turned toward the East for inspiration.

It follows from the above that North American readers concerned with spiritual values will be interested in Pentzikis. But there are also other factors for which Pentzikis would be meaningful to Americans: his restless experimentation with new modes of expression and the often jarring form which his work assumes; his passion for the description and classification of all kinds of data, from skin diseases to painting techniques; his interest in the functional use of everything and anything. Some readers would be also attracted by his discussions of Greek folk customs, tales, and traditions, as well as by his pronouncements on literature and art.

The present study starts with an introductory chapter on Thessaloniki, Pentzikis' native city and a recurrent subject in his writings. The following three chapters discuss Pentzikis' development chronologically, from the time of his first publication to his most recent work in print. These chapters also discuss his evolution as a painter. Chapters 5 and 6 deal with various aspects of Pentzikis' work, his sources, and his relationships with other writers and artists, Greek and non-Greek. Chapter 7, the last chapter, consists of an epigrammatic assessment of Pentzikis, the man and the artist.

The writing of this monograph, an overdue homage to a pioneering modern Greek writer, would have been very difficult without the help of, first of all, Nikos Gabriel Pentzikis himself. He allowed me to translate and quote from his published works, of which he has all the copyrights, helped me with additional material, and was always ready to answer questions or correct factual errors in the earlier drafts of the book. Also helpful were discussions which I have had with Professor John P. Anton of the University of South Florida and with several friends in Greece who know the work of Pentzikis. I would also like to thank Professor Kostas Myrsiades of West Chester College, Pennsylvania, for lending me his taped interview with Pentzikis, and Gabriel Nikos Pentzikis for translating an earlier draft of this book for his father and for helping generally with the project. Special thanks are due to Dr. Kostas Proussis, Emeritus Professor of Hellenic College, Brookline, Massachusetts, for reading the entire manuscript and for commenting extensively on it, and to Professor Edward S. Phinney of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, who also read the manuscript and advised me on numerous points of style.

My transliteration of Greek names and titles of literary works

follows, as a rule, the current practice of transliterating phonetically in order to suggest the sound of the original. The letter *h* is always aspirated, that is, pronounced as in *hat* or *his*, even in words like *Arhion* and *Shina*. Yet, when *h* follows mute consonants like *d* and *g*, it should not be pronounced; it is simply meant to render these consonants softer: *Dhimakoudhis*, *Ghrighorios*. With better-known words I deviate from transliterating phonetically and opt, instead, for established forms such as *Demetrius* and *Hesychasm*; similarly, proper names are spelled in English as preferred by the person concerned (for example, *Nikos Kachtitsis*). Transliterated words are not accented for reasons of aesthetics. The reader should know, however, that no Greek word is stressed before the third syllable from the end.

When first cited, the titles of Pentzikis' books, individual essays and narratives, as well as the titles of Greek journals, are given both in transliteration and translation. In subsequent citations, Pentzikis' works are given only in translation and the titles of journals only in transliteration. Titles of Pentzikis' paintings, as well as the titles of literary and artistic works of others are cited only in translation. Greek or other non-English words used in the monograph are accompanied by their English equivalents in parentheses or explained in the notes, unless the non-English expressions are fairly easy to understand, like *Ficciones*, or are commonly used in English learned criticism, like *magnum opus* and *horror vacui*.

I have tried to be consistent in my use of religious, literary, and other learned terminology, but have occasionally varied my practice by using alternate terms to designate the same thing: chronographers and chroniclers, neomartyrs and new martyrs, *nouveau roman* and "new novel." In my translations from Pentzikis I have resisted the temptation to tamper with or correct his style, or embellish it in any way, and tried to render what he says and the manner in which he says it faithfully. Wherever he is obscure, I add words or explain in brackets. Finally, in discussing Pentzikis, references to Greek sources have been inevitable, as very little on this writer exists in other languages. Regarding more general sources, however, my effort has been to cite books obtainable by the English-speaking reader.

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CHAPTER 1

THESSALONIKI

Nikos Gabriel Pentzikis has identified himself so closely with his native Thessaloniki that a monograph on his work may well start with an introduction to this city of Northern Greece.¹ Thessaloniki represents Greece and, beyond that, the world of man which Pentzikis has come to accept with its shortcomings. In "Topio tou Ine" (Landscape of being), which appears as chapter 7 of his 1970 book *Mitera Thessaloniki* (Mother Thessaloniki), he identifies the parts of his body with the areas and historical periods of Thessaloniki: "Behind my left ear on the temple and at the base of the occipital bone where our life beats in danger, there is the central cemetery with its trees, the Jewish section, the Turkish one, and the sarcophagi of Hellenistic times" (p. 30).² The head is also said to represent the city's crossroads and teems with a multitude of impressions which Pentzikis takes care to list in one and a half pages.

Unlike Athens, whose origins remain a matter of speculation for the archaeologist and the student of mythology, Thessaloniki had a start in known history and a fairly steady existence through the centuries. Built in 315 B.C. by Cassander, the successor in Macedonia of Alexander the Great, the city was named after Cassander's wife (and Alexander's half-sister) Thessaloniki, and became the new imperial capital of Macedonia after Pella, the original capital,

¹ The identification, evident in most of Pentzikis' works, was restated with emphasis in an interview which Pentzikis gave to the Athens daily *Ta Nea* (The news) (June 18, 1977). On Thessaloniki in general, see A. E. Vakalopoulos, *A History of Thessaloniki*. Trans. T. F. Carney (Thessaloniki: Institute for Balkan Studies, 1963).

² Giles Watson, in "A Thessalonian — N. G. Pentzikis" (unpublished essay, in Greek), p. 10, has observed that the writer Vassilis Vassilikos, in his book *Photographs* (Athens: Estias, 1964), p. 92, may have been inspired by Pentzikis in his identification of his own hero with Thessaloniki, for here again we find the idea of various parts of the man's body corresponding to various parts of the city.

had been silted over by the flow of the river Axios. From the early period of the region we possess the oldest Greek papyrus manuscript and many artistic treasures, some of which were shown to the American public in recent years in a special exhibition called "The Search for Alexander."

In Roman times the city of Thessaloniki grew in importance as it had a key position on the trade route, the Via Egnatia, that linked Roman Italy with the Eastern provinces. Cicero spent a few months in Thessaloniki during his exile, and the place became the base of the Pompeians during their struggle with Julius Caesar. Saint Paul founded in Thessaloniki his second Christian church in Europe — the first was in Philippi, near present Cavala — and two of his Epistles are addressed to the Thessalonians. The city developed and prospered as a trade and intellectual center, was visited by Lucian and gave birth to poets like the epigrammatists Antipatros and Philippos.

Thessaloniki's great period began in the fourth century of the Christian era, when the Roman emperor Galerius settled there in order to defend better the eastern part of the Empire from barbarian invasions. The Via Egnatia, or what is left of it in the middle of Thessaloniki, is still spanned by the triumphal arch which Galerius built to commemorate his victory over the Persians. That emperor also built a mausoleum, a round domed building on the model of Hadrian's Pantheon in Rome, which was later converted into a Christian church and is now known as the Rotunda of Saint George. Particularly impressive is the dome of this edifice, while a minaret still flanking the church reminds the visitor of the city's Turkish occupation.

At the time of Diocletian and Galerius, Christians were still persecuted, and it is under such circumstances that Thessaloniki obtained her patron Saint, Demetrius, whom Pentzikis often invokes in his writings. Demetrius was a Roman officer of noble birth who became a convert to Christianity, preached his faith openly, was arrested and suffered the death of a martyr, but not before he had performed his first miracle. Through the bars of his prison cell he blessed another Christian youth, Nestor, who subsequently fought and vanquished the pagan bully Lieos in a public contest. Popular tradition has it that Demetrius was buried in the dungeon

where he had been originally confined, below the present church that bears his name, and that he was called *Myrovlitis* (Exuder of myrrh) on account of the therapeutic exhalations from his relics. Pentzikis always refers to Saint Demetrius with reverence that borders on awe.³

During the Byzantine period, from the fourth to the fifteenth centuries, Thessaloniki became the second most important city of Byzantium after Constantinople. Historians of the time singled her out as a "splendid city", "large and spacious", and "world-famous". In fact, if Athens is mainly known for its ancient monuments — above all the Acropolis — Thessaloniki, together with Constantinople and Ravenna, are the richest centers of Byzantine culture. Apart from the aforementioned churches of Saint Demetrius and Saint George, Thessaloniki possesses the Byzantine churches of Saint Sophia, Saint Catherine, The Holy Apostles, and the charming chapel of Our Lady of the Blacksmiths. Some of these churches follow the basilica plan, while others are built in the shape of a Greek cross. In his works Pentzikis often meditates on the architecture and the symbolic ornamentations of these churches.

The prosperity of Byzantine Thessaloniki suffered repeated setbacks after sieges and sackings by the Saracens and other enemies, who would often leave with thousands of prisoners. In the period of the Crusades the city fell to the Normans and the Venetians. The White Tower, a landmark of the city and one of its most photographed monuments, dates from the city's Venetian period, and so do the remains of the city walls which include traces of other fortification towers. But that was also the time of Efstathios, Archbishop of Thessaloniki and well-known commentator on Homer. Thessaloniki was eventually reconquered by the Byzantines and grew into an important intellectual and spiritual center dominated by the personality of Gregory Palamas. That was in the fourteenth century. In 1430, however, Thessaloniki succumbed to the Turks, twenty-three years before Constantinople had the same fate.

The Turkish occupation of Thessaloniki lasted almost five hundred years, and during this time the city declined in political signif-

³ Cf. chapter 3, p. 43.

icance but remained a main center of trade, a link between the Balkan hinterland and the sea. Toward the end of the eighteenth century the city was inhabited by motley races: Greek Orthodox Christians, Moslems, Jews who had fled from Spain at the time of the Inquisition, and others. The English traveler William Martin Leake provides a graphic description of that period of Thessaloniki as well as of the early nineteenth century in his *Travels in Northern Greece*.⁴ Thessaloniki showed an even greater cosmopolitan character at the end of the nineteenth century, when the ethnic communities included Austrian, French, and German nationals. At that time, the father of Nikos Gabriel Pentzikis was running a successful pharmaceutical business that dealt with several of the Balkan cities.

Greek troops liberated Thessaloniki and made it an integral part of modern Greece on October 26, 1912, the name-day of its patron Saint Demetrius. Pentzikis recalls that he welcomed the Greek soldiers as a child of four on his father's shoulders. A critical year for Thessaloniki was 1917, when a conflagration destroyed the largest portion of the inhabited area. Yet this allowed the creation of a new well-planned city which enhanced rather than obstructed the view of the surviving monuments. The old city, whose charm has been steadily vanishing "like a betrayed revolution", as Dinos Christianopoulos, a modern Thessalonian poet, has somewhat romantically written,⁵ presents narrow streets that wind up to the fortresses and battlemented gates and towers. The streets frame old timbered houses with overhanging storeys, color-washed in pink, white, or blue, and with flowers cascading over yard and garden walls. Beyond the remains of the city walls, at the far distance, one can see Olympus on a clear day, and on the other side, the Thermaic Gulf, fifteen miles deep.

Thessaloniki is oriented toward the sea, not only geographically but also psychologically. In an essay which Pentzikis first published in the forties, and which is included in *Mother Thessaloniki*, he has evoked the ancient and Byzantine past of his native city, bringing together pagan mythology, geography, and medieval history with modern Greek literature that concerns itself with the sea. He views the ancestral world with respect and love both as a treasure en-

⁴ Vol. 3 (1835; reprint ed., Amsterdam: Hakkert, 1967).

⁵ *Piimata* (Poems) (Thessaloniki: "Dhiaghonios", 1974), p. 96.

hanced by the ever-stirring sea and as a throng of specters which haunt this same sea:

The sea which you see when you open the window of your small room looks to you like a most beautiful girl, although you know that you are not going to marry the girl you love and that you have to banish her to a monastery. You must live out your heritage and exorcise the ghosts which the murmur of the water deposits on the shore, ever and ever leaving and returning. (p. 118)

The moment of meditation contains the world of Homer — the man described in the story seeks, like a sulking Achilles, to relieve his feelings by looking out to the sea, his primeval mother — the world of Byzantium and its monastic shelters, and the world of nature. Much comfort comes to the writer from the thought that nature renews itself while discarding nothing and that it is peopled by the living as well as the dead.

Thessaloniki is a city of contrasts, environmental — it has hot and humid summers and cold winters — and also historical and cultural. It was established at the onset of the Hellenistic age with its outward and inward propensities: dissemination of Greek culture, realism in art, and political expansionism, but also inwardness, superstition, mysticism, and magic. In the early Christian centuries the new faith initially preached by Paul fought with paganism and finally triumphed over it, to be challenged in its turn by heresies and later by Islam. The Byzantine chronographers, whom Pentzikis has studied in depth, testify to the vitality, turbulence, and spiritual crises of medieval life in Thessaloniki and other parts of Byzantium, the struggle between body and soul, Christ and Antichrist, good and evil.

Thessaloniki is a city of many ghosts, nameless as well as renowned, whom Pentzikis often conjures up in his works. But it is also a city of the living, men and women of flesh and blood who try to assert their identities, as he points out:

Already, the street had been widened considerably in parts; buses full of the increased population pass by. The woman from the poor home across the street no longer recognizes her neighborhood: "Where are the wealthy homes of old?", she wonders, looking out of the narrow window at the edge of the

house, raising her head from her knitting now and then. The world, she thinks, is deteriorating; ten families are now living where one used to live in comfort. In the big park with the trees there was a small chapel, subsequently torn down to free the lot which, however, nobody has bought and built over. The rich landowner's only son, who planned to have his wedding there some day, died at the same time his house was being demolished. On another spot, they ruined a bunch of sixty-six majestic elm trees, "But for what purpose?", the knitting woman wonders. She grows dizzy from the noise of the traffic in the new street. (p. 15)

Here we get a hint of the great upheaval in the modern history of Thessaloniki, caused by the settlement in the city and its environs of thousands of refugees from Turkey after 1922. Otherwise, the trivial details of the demolition and reconstruction works in the city are meant to stand by themselves, devoid of any sentiment on the part of the narrator. At the same time, all these details, like the baring of the insides of houses and the geometry of the changing walls, provide a framework for the writer's search for identity.

Pentzikis believes that the resettlement of thousands of penniless refugees in Thessaloniki proved in the long run beneficial, for it helped the city find its Greek face. He illustrates this by suggesting that the University of Thessaloniki was built on cemetery land, and that the so enhanced intellectual life of the city may be likened to "a flower in a cemetery."⁶ The axis that holds together the whole of Pentzikis' work is the death-into-life concept. Here, in the thought about the University of Thessaloniki, he applies the concept to the fortunes of his native city, which, as he claims, stands to gain even by the damages which she sustained in the great earthquake of 1978.

⁶ Interview in *Ta Nea*, June 18, 1977.

CHAPTER 2

A YOUNG MAN ALONE

1. *Beginnings*

Nikos Gabriel Pentzikis belongs to the much discussed "generation of the thirties," a group of Greek writers and artists who took modern Greek intellectual life out of the comparative inertia of the twenties. The inertia was partly due to the unfavorable repercussions of the First World War and above all to the impact which the Asia Minor disaster, the uprooting of hundreds of thousands of Greeks from their ancestral homes on the coasts of the Black Sea and Western Turkey, had on the minds of the younger and more promising writers and artists. Some of these espoused Marxism and turned against the status quo, others resigned themselves to an esoteric and melancholic type of expression, and others rejected artistic expression altogether. In reaction to this situation, those writers and artists who started publishing or exhibiting around 1930 felt the need to explore new areas of human consciousness. They also wanted to attune their style to the novel forms already tried in the countries of Western Europe, to which modern Greece had been consistently looking for enlightenment.¹

The center of Greek intellectual life all these years had of course been Athens. It is here that George Theotokas published his manifesto of the new generation, *The Free Spirit*,² here that George Seferis brought out his first collection of poems with the significant title *Turning Point*, here that the painter Ghika presented his works, and here that enterprising and optimistic men launched

¹ A good discussion of the "generation of the thirties" may be found in Thomas Doulis, *Disaster and Fiction. Modern Greek Fiction and the Asia Minor Disaster of 1922* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977).

² For a discussion of Theotokas and his contribution to modern Greek letters, see Thomas Doulis, *George Theotokas* (Twayne, 1961).

avant garde journals like *Ta Nea Gbammata* (New letters) and *To Trito Mati* (The third eye). To a smaller degree but with its own features, the same phenomenon of renewal appeared in Thessaloniki, the capital of Northern Greece. The initial impulse probably came from a sense of competition with Athens in the effort to introduce a fresh awareness into the Greek literary and artistic world. Most of the younger Thessalonian writers in particular had studied abroad or were well read in world literature, philosophy, the still new field of psychology, and aesthetics. Their ambition was to go beyond the modest achievements of their older colleagues, who published mainly in newspapers and serial magazines. Interested in Freud and in authors like Gide and Proust, novice Thessalonian writers like Stelios Xeflouthas, Alkis Yannopoulos, and Yorghos Vafopoulos turned away from national and provincial concerns to introspection or to its opposite, a precise and detached description of the external world.³

Pentzikis spent a few years in France. After visiting Austria in the summer of 1925, he went to study pharmacology, first in Paris and then in Strasbourg between 1926 and 1929. While in the French capital, he used to visit, as he recalls, John Psycharis, the well-known linguist and flag-bearer of Greek demoticism.⁴ Pentzikis had started writing poems in the early twenties and wanted to show them to Psycharis, who always welcomed his young friend and had only kind words about his literary *protolia* (first fruits). In 1929 Pentzikis had to return to his native Thessaloniki to run the drug-store left by his father, who had died in 1927. He decided to publish some of his writings in Thessalonian newspapers, but the response of readers was not very encouraging. As a result, Nikos Gabriel and his first cousin Miltiadhis Pentzikis, also a novice at writing, burned their "first fruits" and started afresh. In his "Apologhos" (Final assessment), which appears in *Omilimata* (Homilies) (1972), Pentzikis refers to this holocaust and lists some of the sacrificed items: an essay inspired by Homer, verses modelled on Greek folk songs, attempts at translation from the medieval romances, imitations of Rilke "who added to the routine of everyday

³ See chapter 6, section 2.

⁴ The movement that helped to establish spoken Greek as the literary and also, by now, the educational language of modern Greece.

life the hemisphere of death," copyings from Ibsen and Jacobsen, copyings from various poets who deal with the decline and decay of old men in coffee-houses, and copyings from Dostoevsky (pp. 95-96).

Five years later, in 1935, Pentzikis' cousin Miltiadhis took his own life. He was an imaginative and learned young man who could not reconcile his ambitions with the reduced social status of his family. He scattered flowers on his bed and then lay on it after taking poison. Nikos Gabriel was having similar frustrations but resisted his own suicidal tendencies and, unlike both his cousin and Andhreas Dhimakoudhis, the hero of his first book, who also killed himself, survived in order to sublimate his frustrations and existential anxieties in a whole life's work of artistic expression.

2. *A Modern Werther*

Pentzikis published his novella *Andhreas Dhimakoudhis* in 1935 under the pseudonym Stavrakios Kosmas. This suggests a cautiousness which is understandable after his own rejection of his earlier writings, but the assumed name also alludes to his preoccupation with Byzantium and the religious roots of modern Greece. Stavrakios (*stavros*=cross) sounds like a monk's name, while Kosmas is the name of a Greek Saint, unless we want to read in it Pentzikis' concern with the world (*kosmas*=world).⁵ In addition, the word *monahos* (alone) of the subtitle of the book "Enas Neos Monahos" (A young man alone) means "monk," if we stress it on the ultimate syllable.

So much for the names and their potential symbolisms. The book has been classified by some critics as *essoterikos monologhos* (interior monologue). Yet its narrative line is clear and consistent, and it is written in the third person. We could safely say that *Andhreas Dhimakoudhis* continues a whole chain of such stories from the romantic era, starting with Rousseau's *Confessions* and Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther*.

Andhreas is a sensitive young Greek studying in a big city of

⁵ Pentzikis has revealed to me that the pseudonym Stavrakios Kosmas is really a combination of the names of two black-market merchants who lived in Byzantium, circa 900 A.D., during the reign of Leo the Wise.

Western Europe, which may have been modeled on Strasbourg or Paris, where Pentzikis had studied pharmacology.⁶ Andhreas is in love with Renée Saeger, a young lady who rents a room in his hotel. He waits for her in the street, watches her coming and going, sends her flowers and gifts, and muses on her for hours on end. His attitude reminds one of Goethe's Werther and also of another romantic figure, Adèle Hugo, who pursued her unwilling lover, an English officer, to the limits of the world and ended up in the madhouse.⁷ Romanticism's logical conclusion is madness.

Pentzikis' young hero grows more and more desperate in his passion for Renée. She is tolerant and even sympathetic at first, but she never accepts his advances and finally becomes angry. He renounces her in his heart several times, but to no avail. Andhreas resorts to extremes: he cuts his finger with a razor to write her name in his own blood and, in a tragicomic attempt to be near her, he hides in a big basket of flowers which he orders sent to her.⁸ The result of this "flower escapade" is that he gets thrown out and told never to bother her again. He has reached the end of the road. There is no return. He must die:

When outside, he started running. He felt overwhelmed again with passions, the anxieties of the lonely heart. He knew that by entering a cookshop and eating well he could laugh off all those feelings, could get rid of the proud image which he held inside himself. But no, he would not betray himself this time. He knew what was good and would stand his ground. He had to shed his individuality and not allow himself a second one. That was now his resolution. Three times he climbed the hill behind which a river flowed; then he knelt down and prayed for strength.

He was able to see from there the whole city. He understood the sequence of human feelings. Whatever he was after, he felt inside himself, in the inmost cells of his existence; he

⁶ Doulis notes that the Greek abroad is given pre-eminent place by several of the Greek writers of the thirties like Theotokas, Petsalis, Nakou, and Kastanakis (*Disaster and Fiction*, p. 175).

⁷ The story of Hugo's daughter was suggestively filmed by François Truffaut in his *Adèle H.*

⁸ The episode echoes a real episode in the life of Pentzikis. In 1928 he sold about three hundred books from his collection so that he could buy as a present to the girl he loved a big doll dressed in a Greek country-style costume.

loved. Let death come as it should. He wanted it and knew its meaning. Death is harmony. Without any fear, for the first time, Andhreas Dhimakoudhis drowned happily in the current of the big river. (pp. 157-158)

The identification of Pentzikis with the hero of *Andhreas Dhimakoudhis* is confirmed later by Pentzikis himself in, among other places, *To Mythistorima tis Kyrias Ersis* (The novel of Mrs. Ersi) (1966), where the writer suddenly comes upon a wall notice of his own funeral, conducted many years earlier. The notice bears the name "Andhreas Dhimakoudhis," (pp. 286-287). Andhreas becomes the prototype of the insecure and vulnerable young man often presented in the works of Pentzikis, at times in traditional garb; for instance, in his book *Pros Eklissiasmon* (Toward church-going) (1970), we find Homeric Achilles crying alone on the sea-shore; Shakespearean Hamlet with his agonizing "to be or not to be;" Stephen Daedalus, the failed writer in Joyce's *Ulysses*, and others (pp. 19-27).

The young man Andhreas remains in the forefront of Pentzikis' novella, vacillating between complete surrender of himself and total possession of the woman he loves or thinks that he loves. The digressions and asides that take whole pages in later books and often grow into the main theme are comparatively few here. The pace of the narrative is fast and animated. The story moves relentlessly to the end, the death of the hero.⁹ On the other hand, Pentzikis, who also lost the girl of his dreams, chose to live. He fared better than his hero, just as Goethe did better than his Werther. Pentzikis overcame the shock of a love betrayed by circumstances and sought to come to terms with the world. The death of Andhreas may thus represent the writer's own surrender of his ego for the quest of a higher life rhythm, which would encompass both himself and his environment.

An attentive rereading of *Andhreas Dhimakoudhis* suggests that this work — the first, simplest, and most conventional in style — contains in germinal form virtually all the directions which Pentzikis will take in his subsequent books. The image of the anguished

⁹ The nervousness and animation of the original *Andhreas Dhimakoudhis* were toned down in the second edition of the work (see chapter 4, section 4).

young man is a constant, but we also get a glimpse into the truth that the world is on the whole an entity independent of us and our individual problems, dreams, or fallacies, and that its contemplation as such will give rest to our disturbed souls. Pentzikis stresses this truth again and again in his later books. He also stresses humility as a counterweight to pride, which explains his love of ascetics and monks. Other typical themes in Pentzikis which are found already in *Andreas Dhimakoudhis* are: the love of plants and herbs — after closely observing a leaf, Andreas picks it and puts it in his wallet, for he wants in this way “to make the tree his own;” the hero’s sentimental attachment to his native city and country; the predilection for games with words and sounds; the devotion, both aesthetic and religious, to pictures.

3. *Formative Years*

After the publication of *Andreas Dhimakoudhis*, Pentzikis strengthened his literary contacts and had various writings printed in journals. His contributions included pieces of prose that fell somewhere between the formal essay or article and the more personal or confessional composition, as well as poems and reviews of painting exhibitions. Pentzikis also published an obituary for his cousin, together with a sample from the dead man’s unfinished novel *The House of Porcelain*,¹⁰ a translation of a text by the Spanish painter Juan Gris, and another translation from E. Dujardin, a French writer of the nineteenth century, who was the precursor of Joyce in the stream-of-consciousness technique, as well as other items.¹¹

The exchanges between Pentzikis and writers and artists who shared similar views were also rich and varied. He contributed regularly to the journal *To Trito Mati*, which was edited by his friend Stratis Dhoulas between 1935 and 1937. One of these contributions, “To Vradhi mias Syntrofias” (The evening of a group of

¹⁰ The excerpt was titled “The Clock-Maker of Petrograd.” The novel was to tell the story of two men, one old and one young, who conflict with reality.

¹¹ Pentzikis translated Dujardin’s “Les lauriers sont coupés,” a poem that appeared in 1887 in *Révue Indépendante*. Dujardin never became famous but Joyce confessed his debt to him and Mallarmé had written him a letter.

friends), again printed under the assumed name of Stavrakios Kosmas, touched upon the problem of reading and assimilating what one reads. In the third chapter of *Toward Church-Going*, Pentzikis has described the contents of a special issue of *To Trito Mati* on the subject of landscape and art, and in "Anapolissis Philologhikes" (Literary recollections) which appeared in *Nea Estia* (New Hestia) in the December 1, 1962, special issue on Thessaloniki, he has reminisced about the writers and artists whom he met or with whom he associated in Thessaloniki in the thirties. Mementoes like a self-portrait drawing of Dhoukas, made "under the influence of alcohol," and receipts from registered letters to the poet Yorghos Sarantaris, were to inspire some of the poems of *Ikones* (Icons) (1944).

In 1933, Pentzikis added painting as a means of artistic expression. He never had any formal training in this art, and while studying in France he was not mature enough, as he says, to appreciate most of the masters displayed in the Louvre. What mainly attracted him at the time was religious painting of the type practiced by Matthias Grünewald, while canvases of the romantic era, like Delacroix's *The Destruction of Chios*, stirred his patriotism. Later, he appreciated the impressionists, above all Monet, who died in 1926 when Pentzikis was still in Paris. He now believes that the impressionists in painting and the symbolists in literature, like Mallarmé and Maeterlinck, are the ones who taught him to accept his inner world.

A decisive factor that turned Pentzikis to painting was the restoration and cleaning of the Byzantine churches of Thessaloniki. Climbing on the scaffolds of the hagiographers, he was able to inspect the Byzantine icons closely. There was still much that he could not understand in the style and symbolism of Byzantine painting. Yet his mind was impregnated with images of saints. He had dreams of them and found a new eloquence in telling these dreams to his friends. Moreover, several of the men he knew practiced more than one art, and Pentzikis felt at the time somewhat like a Renaissance man who had to be good at everything.

It is under these circumstances and while he was recuperating from an illness in Asvestohori — a village near Thessaloniki — that Pentzikis made his first drawings, mostly of flowers, in pencil and

crayon. His break with the girl he loved motivated him to decorate the walls of his room in water color; he registered his experiences through a set of symbols, which he borrowed from nature and from Byzantine painting. His room thus became a mausoleum of his lost love, a depository of memories, a chapel meant to retain and project, on a mythical level, the world as he had known it so far. That was in 1935. The following year Pentzikis made the portraits of his sister and other people.

Pentzikis did not paint much between 1937 and 1941. He finished some drawings which he then sent to his friend Dhoukas, but these were not of any great consequence, he says. He felt that he could not handle watercolor well enough and in a manner which would allow him to achieve special effects. So, in 1940, he started using oil paints and during the war years he made numerous paintings, mostly of landscapes from around Thessaloniki, flowers, and similar subjects. 1943 was a specially productive year for Pentzikis. He made and sold a good number of paintings, and recorded, again symbolically, a new love affair in no fewer than twenty-two canvases. To these he gave relevant titles: *The Embrace*, *The Kiss*, etc.

Pentzikis also lost his grandmother in 1943. In a characteristic painting he presented the dead woman and his new girlfriend. He had the face of the girl emerge from the mirror of a wardrobe, across from the bed where his grandmother's body lay, in order to symbolize his favorite, death-into-life theme. Pentzikis held his first exhibition with a group of other, mostly self-taught artists, in 1944 in a Thessalonian flower-shop!

The truth, however, was that Pentzikis had not caught the attention of the public. People called him at best peculiar — the adjective figured in the title of an interview about the cinema which Pentzikis granted to a newspaper in 1937 — and at worst insane. Also, most of the things he sent out for publication ended up in garbage cans. Yet he continued writing and painting. He corresponded and associated with fellow-writers and friends, while trying to run, though not very efficiently, the family drugstore. The place became a cultural center in Thessaloniki, attracting mostly the younger writers and artists. Pentzikis would often give out his medicines free. His generosity, along with the non-productive time which he spent on literary discussions, meant a meager income. His

paintings eventually made more money than the pharmacy business. Painting sometimes provided for basic needs, as when he exchanged a series of canvases, among which was *Jonas in the Sea*, for coal.

Financial and literary insecurity, compounded with his failure to marry the woman he had originally loved, were responsible for the morbid feelings that permeated the writings of Pentzikis. In "Aidhiasma" (Disgust) the narrator is sensitive to the point of hypochondria, and it seems that the ill feeling which he gets in his throat, stomach, and head are nervous reactions to a deeper dissatisfaction with himself. Several pieces of prose writing, collected in *Synodhia* (Retinue) (1970), express these feelings:

The streetcar tracks end here. There are still more habitations and people. I want to leave, to walk off. I fear the light. Oh, if only there were no sun, if only darkness fell and I could hide my shame inside the night, if only I could not see and could not be seen. (p. 14)

The scene, in the same narrative, of a sister of mercy praying by the side of a patient marks a moment of relief. This scene, however, is quickly replaced by the scene of a sad and hungry patient whose eyes command a small space through the open window.

Similar feelings pervade another narrative, "Moungos ke Piitis" (The mute and the poet), from the same period. Here we get a kaleidoscopic survey of moods, shades of questioning and despairing, that lead to a new faith in life after the writer has accepted the facts of transience and death. The spectacles of a consumptive mother and a blind man with swollen eyelids induce the writer to read prayers from a breviary. Things, he feels, do not really perish but are transfigured. The title of the piece, "The mute and the poet", suggests this very idea. Poetry, that is, creativity in the broad sense — for the etymological meaning of the Greek *piitis* (poet) is "maker" — is an answer to "muteness" (pp. 37–40).

Pentzikis explored the problem of literary composition in the essay "I Poria ke to Stamatima" (The journey and the stop). In this exploration he started from personal experiences. His work at the family drugstore had been often interrupted by children asking for empty boxes to play with, an occurrence also referred to in *The*

Novel of Mrs. Ersi (pp. 176–177), and by the unannounced visits of customers and friends. These last would come not with the purpose of promoting his business, but rather of sharing their personal problems with him. Pentzikis reflected on all this and, eventually, on the more serious problem faced by a modern writer in his attempt to bestow unity to his writing (pp. 15–36).

Modern writers have no choice but to mirror the world which they see around them. The world, however, is complicated and fragmented. Pentzikis concluded that creative writing nowadays has to assume some form of the absurd. The elusive unity was to be achieved on a surreal level. How else? Nobody who rejected abstractions and general concepts in order to perceive and express the world from very close up could ever hope to acquire all the knowledge, scientific and scholarly, necessary for such a task. The modern writer must dare to cut through the Gordian knot of literary tradition and return to a stage where words preserve their elemental force. The young man of “The Journey and the Stop” compiles a list of various people and of their particular diseases. The exercise sets his memory in motion. He becomes a child again and succeeds in combining fantasy with the concrete by naming everything that surrounds him and thus making it, in a magical way, his own.

Writing and painting were indeed the chief methods by which Pentzikis sought and at times achieved the mythical world of completion for which he yearned since his early youth. His growing attachment to Thessaloniki and the Christian traditions of his homeland on the one hand, and his insistent examination of various aspects of the external, objective world on the other, were two different but complementary ways of wrestling with the problem of identity. The self-complacent, Werther-like idea that he was a sensitive and refined individual, born in the wrong period of history and in an imperfect world order, was always strong in him. But equally strong was his inclination to reach out.

4. *The Dead Man and the Resurrection*

The process of reaching out is exemplified in the *O Pethamenos ke i Anastassi* (The dead man and the resurrection), which Pentzikis

wrote in 1938. The unnamed hero of the story dies, as Andhreas Dhimakoudhis did earlier, but does not pass into the great unknown. He dies in order to rise again into the world of God and of the senses. Dhimakoudhis had been the victim of his own feelings. Emotions had cut him off from the world. They had acted as a screen of smoke that distorted his relationship with the "other," the person outside himself. Away then with emotions! Economize on psychology!

Here one recalls Natalie Sarraute and her famous as well as startling dictum that modern writers will blush when they hear the attribution of psychology to their works. Pentzikis has also said many times that there can be no "human person" based on feeling alone and that we cannot speak today of an "individual." A person is an object, a self-observing object at most. This is the spirit of the *nouveau roman* and also the spirit that motivates *The Dead Man and the Resurrection*.¹²

This book, Pentzikis' second, marked a critical moment in his development. By writing it, he discovered himself or rather worked himself into a dialectic position with the world. This position he was to cultivate, in various ways, through his later years. That was also the moment at which Pentzikis asserted himself as an original writer who published under his real name, Nikos Gabriel Pentzikis.

Pentzikis confesses in the beginning of *The Dead Man and the Resurrection* that he has attempted to write a novel about a young man. We soon realize that Pentzikis describes himself — someone approaching middle age, yet in many respects still an adolescent. Anguished introspection interrupts long passages that describe the external world, especially Thessaloniki: "I have lost all spirit. I do not know. I cannot continue writing. My nature wavers all the time. My form is lost in the vessels I fill". The narrator is conscious of the things he misses, especially a home with a happy mother and a child and himself as the father. He often dreams of this. The image of a happy family recurs, vested in romantic and religious hues, but the man realizes that it will remain for him fictional. He and the woman whom he loves cannot unite. The feeling of loss yields to its denial,

¹² See chapter 6, section 1.

and the narrator eventually resolves to examine human weakness more objectively and find some solution for his problem within the wider spectrum of his city, the traditions of his land, and religion.

Pentzikis wrote *The Dead Man and the Resurrection* without any chapter divisions, suggesting the *durée réelle* which is life, the constant flow of time outside, but also inside the mind of the narrator and through the channels of his memory. Sometimes he struggles against this flow and other times he sails with it. The objective parts of the story are no longer simple digressions from the main narrative but tend to become the main narrative. The young man describes the interior of his room and what he is able to see from his window, and tells stories — often bluntly and naturalistically — about people he knows. This in turn leads to a sentimental crisis, to be followed by the rejection of sentiment as a false guide and another suppression of the emotional self:

Mass of things in confusion. Noise from the traffic of automobiles that go in parallel with, or make easier, lighten the steps of people. A horse confined between the wooden leads, near a motor that competes with it. Someone runs in a hurry with a bunch of receipts in his hand. Discussions and arguments. A barefoot boy brings on a metal tray the order of coffee and sweets to the shops. On his return he swings the empty tray, running by a ship anchor left onshore after it had supported its ship against the currents that can drag you along. The boy passes by and touches it with his finger. They are on friendly terms, those two. (pp. 63–64)

The narrator takes his own life, but we are not given a description of the suicide. The implication is that the death is no longer physical but figurative. The man surrenders that part of himself which had difficulty identifying with his environment. The work ends appropriately: "Then I remember hearing about a dream seen many times by my maternal grandmother, that under our house there was a church. She used to see a venerable figure commanding us to demolish the house and find a church underneath."

The Dead Man and the Resurrection reveals Pentzikis as a writer determined to embrace in his writing whatever is most modern in creative writing, but also as one who will often turn and pray as a child would in front of his patron saint's icon. The tension that

results from these two opposing views of the world, the objective and the mythical, and the need to harmonize them have characterized Pentzikis all his life.

5. *Byzantine Tension*

The pious element in Pentzikis had been nourished, since his childhood years, by the women of his home and his own familiarity with the Byzantine background of Thessaloniki and Greece in general. In "Literary Recollections," the 1962 *Nea Estia* article, Pentzikis mentions that his sister Zoe Karelli, who eventually distinguished herself as a poet and dramatist, placed the heroine of her first attempt at a novel under the half-faded mural near a small door of the church of Saint Nicholas Orfanos in Thessaloniki. The heroine of this novel, which remained unfinished, was presented in a contemplative mood that related to her Byzantine environment. One also notes that Karelli's later work, though less religious than the work of her brother, is definitely colored by the pious background of her family and city.

Pentzikis' own religiosity also had to do with his early visit to Athos, the Holy Mount of Greek Orthodoxy. That first visit in 1933 and subsequent visits to Athos motivated him to study the Byzantine writers, most of whom had a religious strain in their work. He approached them at first, he says, with the curiosity of a tourist. But gradually his affection for and reliance on church tradition grew stronger. Pentzikis' attitude strikes us as more or less anachronistic when we consider the great influence that political ideologies of a socialist, atheistic bent exercised on the minds of the young in the thirties. We wonder whether eccentricity, an inclination to be different, drove him to the Church.

It may be partly so. His deeper motivation, however, may have had to do with his perception of how far political credos can be compromised in practice. Also, through observing himself and others, Pentzikis knew that man was a weak and volatile creature, often unable to reason out his deeper problems. Humility generated by that knowledge found expression in the sign of the cross:

I continue. Let no one accuse me for crossing myself first. This is no superstition. I follow an old sanctified habit of ours in

order to express humility and the fact that I am full of doubts about my own abilities. (*The Dead Man and the Resurrection*, p. 48)

In his book *Toward Church-Going* (1970), Pentzikis has included a confessional essay, "Eros tis Eklissias" (Love for the Church), which provides a lucid and moving account of his gradual acceptance of the Greek Orthodox Church as the spiritual treasury without which he could not live. It is particularly interesting that Pentzikis defends the Church with hardly any help from abstract theology or Greek nationalism.

Pentzikis had told his friends that a simple, genuine attachment to the Church could solve all problems. They contradicted him with arguments, which he thought were perfectly logical, arguments based on the architectural and moral decline of the Church, the limited education of priests, and the narrow attitudes of his own pious relatives and friends concerning the young lady he once loved. Instead of challenging these arguments, Pentzikis supported them further and even quoted from the *Apocrypha* of Prokopios and from other Byzantine historians who give us glimpses into the seamy side of Christian Byzantium.

Yet the question which he finally put to them was whether the Church was not, like existence itself, a gift from above which humans (including priests and monks) will often spoil. They were not convinced, and the exchange of views on this matter fell through. Pentzikis, however, had an almost tangible experience (the nature of which is not specified) at Cavala (a city near ancient Philippi), which acted as a protective shroud over and around his feelings, and guided him again toward the road "that bears the epigraph of God the creator and is divided vertically by the sin of the self-determined creature."

For some time Pentzikis had feared that submission to the Church might reduce his personality to "dust," for when he first went to Mount Athos, he was still certain about the solidity of his ego and considered nonsense the story found in *Synaxaristis*¹³

¹³ Compendium of texts on the lives, sayings, and deeds of saints. The work originated in early Byzantine times but was updated and variously adapted and commented upon by Saint Nikodhimos the Athonian in the eighteenth century. The name of the compendium comes from *synaxis* (assembly), as extracts or summaries

about a Saint who showed early signs of piety by refusing to suckle his mother on Wednesdays and Fridays, customary days of fasting. Later on, Pentzikis felt that in this, as well as in other religious stories, there was some essential truth, which, nevertheless, he was unable to prove logically. This upset him. He kept losing debates with his friends, while the awareness and love of the absurd grew inside him. It was some kind of death seeking a rebirth.

He started touring the Byzantine churches and little by little the church architecture and ornamentation, the poetry and the music of the rituals imbued his sense of the absurd and helped him commune with another world. He felt that anyone could have a place in the world and that it was a matter of choice, as he explained in "Love for the Church":

From studying the monuments of our religious tradition, I have drawn conclusions about the symmetrically unsymmetrical and about the fact that an uneven square may be geometrically more correct than an even one, about rhythm as the basic element explaining the world and human life, about the importance of choosing the smallest possible unit so that the total be fair, about the limits of the personal, which can best be expressed at times through copying, about the fact that beauty can be felt by a sensitive agent, extracted and transferred outside its original source to another and another until it becomes possible for someone today to invest himself with the mythical gown of the Homeric epics and so dressed in old garments to appear synchronized, in line with the most fashionable philosophies. It is so that I came to understand the words of my mother's mother when she changed my diapers: "Christ and the All Holy Virgin change and my grandson puts on their throw-aways". (pp. 64-65)

In the rest of this essay, Pentzikis reinforces his main point by using various devices. He quotes from the church liturgy; remembers Saint Mary of Egypt "who made herself worthy of holy communion only after letting her solid ego dissolve into a cloud of light"; and reminisces about Mighdhalia, a maid of his paternal house, who strengthened in him the element of faith. His conclu-

from it are read by custom during "assemblies" or gatherings of monks at mealtime and on other occasions. See also chapter 5, section 10.

sion is that one can achieve unity if he finds the courage to say "I am another," and this can best be said in the frame of Christianity.

When it comes to basic, existential questions, Pentzikis seems to reject rational answers. It is not, therefore, through rationality or even common sense that he tries to justify his allegiance to the Church. He believes with the simple and unalloyed faith of the simple man, the faith which he sees as the main thrust behind the Christian monuments and traditions of his land. His intelligence, on the other hand, drives him to explore the deeper meaning of this faith and of its material manifestations. Hence, the paradoxical statements about the unsymmetrical symmetry and the personal impersonality of the Christian traditions.

We understand this better when we know that a sense of humility compelled the typical architect or builder of a Byzantine church to shun perfection and total symmetry in the construction and alignment of walls and cupolas. His handicraft, which was the church, had to suggest humankind's imperfection vis-à-vis its creator. In ancient times the classical quest for symmetry and originality derived from humankind's faith in having the ability to shape and express the world. The Byzantine architect and artist tried to avoid such a quest which might lead to excessive pride, disunity and fragmentation. Thus copying, imitating a tradition, and responding with trust to forms handed down through generations do not, according to Pentzikis, negate the true nature of humanity but instead uphold it.

6. *Homilies*

The bulk of Pentzikis' collection of prose, *Homilies*, was written in 1939-1940 and is akin to *The Dead Man and the Resurrection*, which was written in 1938. In the first essay, Pentzikis deals with the problem of a writer's identity, of success or failure to assert an identity. Pentzikis' self-analysis cuts very deep and is often excruciating. He plays various roles or imagines himself playing roles that run back and forth through time and are not delimited by geography. Both the first and the third persons are employed in the narration, and the work ends on a religious note that involves Mount Athos and Gregory Palamas.

Palamas, to whom Pentzikis refers, always with great reverence,

nearly as often as he does to Saint Demetrius, was the dominant figure in the spiritual awakening of Thessaloniki in the fourteenth century. He came from a princely family and might have had a career in the Byzantine imperial service, but he elected a life of religious study. He donned the simple habit of a monk, and spent many years of meditation on Mount Athos. The particular movement which he initiated was called Hesychasm (from Greek *hesychia*, "being quiet," or keeping one's silence, or practicing the life of a monk).

According to Father J. Meyendorff, a scholar who has methodically studied Orthodox theology, the term Hesychasm (also frequently referred to as Palamism through association with its champion, Gregory Palamas), has four possible meanings. It suggests, first and most importantly, the Christian monastic life — hermetism and contemplation as well as "mental prayer"; secondly, in a more restricted way, it denotes a psychosomatic method of prayer, according to which one sits on a stool with the chin resting on the chest and the eyes fixed upon the central point of the body, the navel, and asks for God's mercy, intoning countless times, "Kyrie, Eleison," (Lord, have mercy), until achieving illumination; thirdly, Hesychasm is the theory that makes a distinction between the transcendent nature of God, which is inaccessible, and the manifest energies, through which God becomes known; it was reputed that the Hesychasts had visions of the *aktiston phos* (uncreated light); fourthly, the movement may be viewed from a political and social point of view as an ideology that trusts in God and is skeptical about humankind's capacity to regulate affairs by reason alone.¹⁴

Hesychasm found a fierce opponent in Barlaam of Calabria, a learned monk from the South of Italy, who, though he had gone to Byzantium originally because of his opposition to the Western Church, represented in his criticism of Palamas the scholastic tradition of the West. But Hesychasm was also criticized by Byzantine savants like Nikiphoros Ghrighoras and was referred to pejoratively as *omphaloskopia* (navel-gazing). There were many public debates, and the controversy involved even the imperial family.

Palamas, however, was not really initiating doctrines and prac-

¹⁴ J. Meyendorff, *Byzantine Hesychasm* (London: "Variorum reprints", 1974).

tices of his own. He was merely trying to clarify what earlier fathers of the Church had said regarding the nature of divinity and the ways in which man could comprehend and commune with it. Such earlier fathers were Gregory of Nyssa, Maximos the Confessor, and Symeon the Young Theologian (an eleventh-century mystic, perhaps the greatest of the Orthodox Church). John of the Climax also had recommended breathing practices, perhaps not very different from the analogous exercises of the Yoga followers of today. Others had intimated that the "uncreated light" was the same kind as the light that had shone long ago on Mount Tabor and the light sent to the Apostles at Pentecost.¹⁵

The fourteenth century of Byzantium, the age of Palamas, looks in retrospect, as Pentzikis remarks elsewhere, like a long-drawn death agony, with the weakened borders of the state being overrun steadily by the Turks. The political insecurity of the times may in fact have contributed to the introspective, not to say passive, theology of mysticism and Hesychastic practices. Similarly, modern social unrest and family problems as well as the feeling of personal contradictions must have encouraged in Pentzikis the conviction that a human being is an essentially weak creature with delusions of grandeur, who can find solace and sustenance only in forces outside its own unreliable and shifting self.

Pentzikis' own colossal effort as a writer who knows that he will never become popular may be likened to the Hesychast's fervent pursuit of illumination through asceticism. Writing is Pentzikis' own *askissi* (exercise in monastic life), which, like any other devotional practice, does not exclude anxiety and doubt. In the postscript to the *Homilies*, the essay "Apology", Pentzikis reviews the question of literary writing critically:

Brothers . . . it is a word which I learned to use at the end of the *Homilies*. But I am not sure that I was right. I must excuse myself whenever I use terms handed down to us from the religion of Christ. I am quite different from the people of old times. My intentions, purposes, dreams, words, nothing of mine can draw authority from the established tradition.

One way of dealing with this problem is to write. This is

¹⁵ See Sir Steven Runciman, *The Great Church in Captivity* (Cambridge University Press, 1968), pp. 128-158.

something which, in a way, allows me to feel that I commune with the world of tradition and that I am not a stranger, spiritually, to anything. I need, then, to write so long as I breathe, in a manner parallel to the Latin *dum spiro spero*.¹⁶ Writing is my hope. But the problem is that I can write nothing that will stand on its own, which others can read and say: "Bravo, I understand you." Who will read me? (p. 87)

The above lines reveal Pentzikis as a man in the world and of the world. He wants to be read and appreciated but feels that this is not happening or is not happening in the way he would like. He then draws comfort from the thought that writing is an act valuable in itself, perhaps a world of its own:

Whatever I cannot achieve in action I try to reach by means of writing. I sense that writing cannot be the simple description or recollection but the very thing that exists and is lacking in us. Writing is a contractual act, properly signed, with what is absent; a testimony sealed forever.

The historian who makes a mediocre description of what happens is inadequate. He watches from some distant watchtower, after deserting the present. He judges on the authority of the four hundred *dhramia*¹⁷ of his brain. He speaks of the past and lives in the future.

The act of writing, however, ignores present and future entirely. It exists only as an eternal and permanent moment. In exactly the same way in which we must understand the line of Saint Romanos the poet: "a newly-born child, the god annunciated centuries ago." (p. 90)¹⁸

These two passages suggest a curve in the mind of Pentzikis, a curve through which he has undoubtedly been led numerous times. It starts with the feeling of alienation from the world of tradition, the world of Pentzikis' roots. Pentzikis perceives that a fragmented twentieth-century man can only cross himself mechanically and use the word "brothers" with a sense of guilt for being insincere. Writ-

¹⁶ "So long as I breathe I hope." From an elementary Latin reader familiar to older high school graduates in Greece.

¹⁷ The equivalent of an *oke*, an old Turkish measure of weight (two and three quarter pounds).

¹⁸ From a hymn on the birth of Christ by the Byzantine religious poet Romanos Melodhos, who lived in the reign of Justinian and Theodora.

ing is a solution, it helps restore Pentzikis' contact with the world, brings close to him the people, the things, and the times about which he writes. But writing presupposes readers, whom Pentzikis felt he did not have. This realization marks a second critical stage in Pentzikis' creative process. He overcomes the crisis by throwing the question of readership overboard. In contrast to historical and scholarly writing, creative writing can stand on its own. It is a kind of breath or rhythm that governs the whole self and encompasses not only the writer, but also the "other," reader and non-reader alike. It also cuts across space and time.

This is a mystical perception of writing that finds support in the analogue of the incarnation of Christ, referred to in the verses of Romanos. Writing is a kind of incarnation that fulfills its own purpose.

7. *Icons*

The *Icons* is a series of poems in free verse which Pentzikis wrote in 1943. They express his responses to letters, photos, and other souvenirs kept in a carton. Much of what Pentzikis has written starts with such cartons.

Although the Greek title, *Ikones*, is ambiguous, as it may refer to several types of images (in the Orthodox tradition, "icons" are religious representations, usually in color, which can be portable or fixed to walls), critics found these poems cerebral in contrast to the more descriptive and lyrical verses by Pentzikis of later years.

In his introduction, Pentzikis states that the first eight poems were written while he was looking at a number of photos of sculptures from the Louvre. He then takes great care to list all these items in almost one whole page, but not before he expresses some thoughts that seem to make the listing more meaningful:

My problem is the search of the other in the mythical depth of the ego beyond any pretext of surface where antithesis as well as opposition stretch out. I am an *erotikos* and try to find a way for love after accepting the factor of distance, the loss of any natural bond. I do not stand on what I feel. What I feel helps me understand what was the motive of feeling in the life of the other. I have no feelings that express me. My person is rendered by chance, the incidental finding of an objective reality

where the flowing essence of my being can rest, for a moment, in form, as in a bridal chamber. (p. 2)

Here one can note the tension, also found in passages quoted earlier, between the two poles of Pentzikis' nature, the heart and the mind. In his approach to the world, Pentzikis wishes to overcome the curse of confused emotions on the one hand and the abstractions of his reasoning part on the other. He feels that he should go down to basics, that his reactions should be like those of objects in all their purity, unclouded by emotions and thoughts, which tend to compartmentalize and distort reality. This is the modern element in the character of Pentzikis. At the same time, the words which he uses in his discussion, *erotikos* and "bridal chamber," give out his essentially warm, sentimental nature.

The *Icons* are not self-contained poems, based more or less on mood, or offering a more or less particular message. They are rather like stages in a process, ways of developing a long poem. The poem is never really finished. It keeps its exploratory, tentative character. Pentzikis negates feeling as a defining element in his relationship with the world. He aims for the object:

By dying I myself become an object, a statue of life, a replica like the face which I now hold before me admiring it, as the artist of the Renaissance admired a vertebra of the human body. The truth of the human body's life with all its possible variations excels over any idea. (p. 6)

The importance which memory assumes in Pentzikis' evolution as a writer must be stressed at this stage. Working with a bunch of mementoes before him, Pentzikis both challenges and surrenders to his memory. He is deliberate when he extracts from memory its secrets, but he also finds in memory an escape from actuality — in the case of the *Icons* the actuality of war and personal failure.

Only the first and last of the nine poems have their own titles; the others are numbered.

The dual mechanism of memory is already discernible in the first poem, "Dhidhahi" (Instruction):

I therefore think of myself as an educator
I must express the eternal and true side of life
the memory of senses is a faded rose inside of me

an intoxication full of thought embraces the characters
 an embroidery that adorns and a thing caught separate
 handkerchief full of sorrowful face
 with the hair in which I comb the enclosed half-world
 with all the masts and riggings the hair
 of sentimental motions I am drenched through with sorrow
 I know the fatal roads to which we return
 the fatigued sterility which divides subject from object.
 (vv. 24–34)

The impatient and charged lines suggest the struggle of the observing mind with memories. These, like roses pressed between the pages of an old book, preserve enough of their fragrance to challenge and obstruct the mind's resolution to break out into a state of pure essence, of an indivisible objective reality.

The second poem starts emphatically on a note of pain. The poet feels the pain when he realizes that he cannot relate to other people. He would like to have love for the other person. But this seems impossible without the concomitant feeling of possession, namely that he possesses and that he is also possessed. His senses inform him well; he has eyes that can see and hands that can touch. Yet he is like "a cork in the ocean of feeling." He will feel lost so long as he gives in to his emotions. He must sacrifice them. He will wake up a "victor", one morning, after he has surrendered part of himself, seen and gladly joined the festive procession over the tomb of "dead love."

This poetry is really much more angular than mere summaries or descriptions of it can show. In its convolutions, however, one discerns Pentzikis' constant and insistent search for a rhythm. He looks for a pattern, a method of living that will honor both the complexity and the simplicity of life. The search is more explicit in the sixth poem:

I must not fail anything
 more of the components of being
 in the matrix that is being put together
 the beautiful in simple forms
 simplicity and complicated structure
 progressing all the time
 developing the [various] species the [one] species

everything of the body is significant
 on the throne she sits
 the cushion that supports her back
 the psychological folds of the clothes.

(vv. 16-26)

This is of course the flow, the vital flow — often undercut or reversed by its own rashness but also persistent — of the subject to the object, a movement which Pentzikis suggests more clearly in these lines from the fourth poem:

Completely alone I do not understand
 what is the use of my modesty
 the meditation of my tight lips
 the voluptuous look
 the bending of the head in sadness
 I think of every detail
 until it can be seen in its own light
 passages from the subject to the object
 the object has its own value
 if I love life I should not subdue it
 its not coming to see me does not matter.

(vv. 33-43)

The ninth and last poem, "Rapsodhia Sheseon" (Rhapsody of relationships) is a poem *fleuve* of five hundred and seventy-three lines. In a brief note appended to the poem, Pentzikis informs us that the writing of this piece was bracketed by two deaths, the death of a cousin of his mother and that of an old lady who used to clean his drugstore. One death heralds the poem and another underscores it. But the poem itself also contains visions of death, among which is the memory of the funeral of Pentzikis' own father. Dryly descriptive scenes alternate with meditative parts, in which the experiences of death are reevaluated under the light of religion:

The deluge, if you survive it, continues for a whole life
 until the olive tree of peace springs up at the entrance
 leaving behind all private knowledge on horseback
 given to the cosmic motion which stars follow
 a pilgrim with gold incense and myrrh
 come to the cave where the earth touches the unreachable.

(vv. 165-170)

8. *The Ways of the Snail*

A kind of explosion in Thessaloniki's literary life, repressed by the war years, was the publication in December 1945 of the journal *Koblias* (Snail). The editor of the journal was the writer Yorghos Kitsopoulos, but its soul was Pentzikis. Other contributors to the monthly *Koblias* (the name aptly symbolized their introspective but also sinuous style),¹⁹ were the poets Zoe Karelli, Takis Varvitsiotis, Yorghos Themelis; the prose writer Yorghos Dhelios and the painter Yannis Svoronos.

Pentzikis placed in *Koblias* much of the material that later found a more permanent home in his books. This material included original pieces, translations from writers like Joyce and Berdiaeff, older ones like Kierkegaard, Shestov, Novalis, de Nerval, Rabelais, the Byzantine chronographer Psellos, and the still older writers Synesios and Plotin. In *Koblias* Pentzikis also published his critiques of fellow poets and fellow artists. To give an example of the contents of *Koblias*, one could cite the issue of June 18, 1947. It includes a complete translation of Mallarmé's *Igitur* and an article on the French poet, both by Pentzikis, a drawing by the painter Yorghos Bouzianis, a prose piece by Yorghos Kitsopoulos, another by Henry Miller in translation, and Pentzikis' review article on the poet Yorghos Themelis.²⁰

One of Pentzikis' own narratives, initially published in *Koblias* 4 (1946), as "Mia Kori" (A maiden) and which appears in *Retinue* with the title "Neara Kori" (Young maiden), is an exhaustive description of a young lady in motion — the narrator follows her to work and then home. We recall Renée of *Andbreas Dhimakoudhis*, but the lady here is no longer the individual beauty that absorbs, sponge-like, the sensibility of the man, but rather a pretext for a concrete and minute description of the space that contains her. The young lady grows in size and significance, embracing the whole world. Then she is fused with the world to the degree that the man suddenly loses her from sight. But this is a transitional stage, out of which he makes a "jump" to see her on another level, that of myth:

¹⁹ The image of a snail shell was also projected in the spiral arrangement of the journal's subtitle words: literature, poetry, visual arts, criticism, life. The word "life" is significantly found in the very center of the spiral.

²⁰ See chapter 6, section 5.

Who is she? I took her to be approachable but she is not. Unconquerable castle with iron gates. You touch her, but she eludes your touch. She has built a tower with the heads of the young men who tried to win her. I wore out three pairs of iron shoes following her day and night. I do not know what the problem is. I have lost my speech. I find myself without knowledge in an ocean of matter. I can make out many people only from the waist up or only their heads, not the whole body. I am shipwrecked in the mass of phenomena. I cannot find any certain form. Beauty generates monsters. Horrible and ugly results. In the darkness I grope for land, leaving behind me all those things that inspire fright. Where is the bridge which carries you to life? I cannot see but feel. Planted in my rib, you accompany me since the time of Adam. Considering mankind, I raise my eyes and recognize the land, familiar from ancestors and forefathers. I let my body float. I am in the river Aliakmon.²¹ The waters under me are illuminated. I can see fragments of ancient reliefs, tiles and stones from churches. I hunt a stag at the river bank, and across the river I can make out a light. The river lets me cross it without wetting my feet. I lean on humble vegetation, lichens and weeds covering the rocks. I walk through branches with drying leaves, which drop at my step. The light came from a naked skull. I take it up with tenderness. I place it helmet-like on my head. I hear the mill that turns and grinds the flour. My palms are filled with flour. The birds come down and help themselves. My view has changed. I talk with them. The mist is clearing from the branches. I can see you. You are my river companion. I can see your hand. A human form. Unique Maiden. (*Retinue*, pp. 69–70)

Here again, Pentzikis is shown in the see-saw, up-and-down movement of his unquiet nature. Initially attracted by a young lady, he nevertheless resists being absorbed by her. He ponders her surroundings and sets out to describe the organic frame into which she fits. The effort results in his losing her from sight. This frightens rather than reassures him. He feels compelled to search for the vanished object of his attraction, for, after all, he is a lover of forms. But he gets confused. Like Eurydice with Orpheus, the woman eludes her man, and in her elusiveness she grows into someone

²¹ One of the big rivers of Greek Macedonia.

monstrous like the princess Turandot, immortalized by Puccini, who played with the lives of the young men vying to win her. He does find her again, but only after undergoing a purificatory descent to the underworld, that is, the past of his homeland. The lady reappears but in an idealized form. She is now a combination of the great maidens of myth, the corn-goddess Persephone and the All Holy Virgin.

After the demise of *Koblias* in early 1948, Pentzikis placed his writings in journals like *O Eonas mas* (Our century) and *Morphes* (Forms). In the former he published his articles on the painters Yorghos Papaloukas and Ghika,²² and in the latter his translation into modern Greek of the Byzantine work *Barlaam and Ioasaph* (or *Iosaphat*), an edifying story commonly attributed to Saint John of Damascus of the eighth century A.D.²³ Although this work seems to be an adaptation to medieval Christianity of the legend of Buddha, it must have attracted the attention of Pentzikis, as it glorifies monasticism and the veneration of icons. Also woven into the narrative are speeches with expositions of Christian doctrines, confessions of faith, and quotations from early Christian writers, as well as fables and parables. One of these fables, the so-called Tale of the Caskets, occurs also in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*.

Barlaam and Ioasaph had enjoyed great popularity in medieval times and generated other works, romances, sermons, and plays. Its translation into modern Greek by Pentzikis — the longest that he ever attempted — marks his firmer orientation toward the Byzantine world. On the other hand, Pentzikis never finished his translation of Joyce's *Ulysses*, although he considered Joyce to be the greatest prose writer of the twentieth century. In spite of his greatness, Pentzikis says, Joyce remained an individual who kept his pride.²⁴

9. Knowledge of Things

The first creative period of Pentzikis was rounded out in 1950 with the publication in book form of *Pragmatoghnossia* (Knowl-

²² See chapter 6, section 6.

²³ *Barlaam and Ioasaph* can be read in the Loeb Classical Library edition (London and New York, 1914).

²⁴ See chapter 6, section 1.

edge of things), a series of essays originally printed in the journal *Morphes*. The progression from the self-tormented hero of *Andreas Dhimakoudhis* to the unnamed man, aware of his Thessalonian environment, of *The Dead Man and the Resurrection*, is here completed in what could be called a "total immersion" in the objective world, the world outside. There is no longer a central character or even an anonymous Lazarus resurrected from the dead, but rather a world which contains man and his problems, just as it contains plants, stones, and city streets. This is the existentialist's search in reverse — the writer's consciousness does not coil around itself but spreads out like a network of veins into a mass of objective phenomena.

Knowledge of Things signals a critical moment in the evolution of Pentzikis as a writer. He later might have drifted into dryness. He might have developed some sort of literary idiom devoid of sentiment, or he might have given up writing altogether. But *Knowledge of Things* only represents a stage in a cycle of conduct, which a critic has described as follows: Pentzikis tries to communicate effectively with other people, but is hindered by social convention. He therefore retreats into himself, but he cannot stand loneliness. In order to find an outlet, he turns to religion, on which he is unable to settle entirely, because his rationality militates against the adoption of transcendental solutions. Then he passes to an extreme abnegation of the self through an objective apprehension of the world. The bulk of *Knowledge of Things* marks this last stage. What could have been taken as pretensions of synthesis in the first two books of prose are absent here. He describes people and their mundane concerns, as well as external realities, topographical or otherwise, in a paratactic manner. The secret wish of Pentzikis is to win the obliteration of his tormented self in the quicksand of the senses, and reach, beyond the senses, the world of objective reality.

Pentzikis is here like a reporter who goes around with a camera and a tape recorder, into which he registers whatever he sees or hears. He looks into the minds of passers-by and reads their thoughts or records their heartbeats. He need not knock at doors, for he has a master key that opens all rooms. He enters and keeps on describing: names, movements, a balloon in the hand of a girl with which the sea-breeze plays, the illuminations of an old manu-

script, books which a young character by the name Dhiamantis has read, the false dream of Homeric Agamemnon. Memory intervenes, admits, grinds, and connects time. The writer pauses for memory; then he follows his subject from room to room, charting his gestures and pursuing his thoughts.

The breakthrough comes at the end of the book. The chapter "Outis" (No Man) starts with a thought on life and death:

The flowers that adorn the dead in his coffin fade like the chrysanthemums of autumn. Winter keeps nothing of its own for Spring. The dead remain expressionless like silence. All idols were disturbed and ruined by silence. How does man remain alive? Is there in his form something uncorruptible? What is that? I wonder. Yet, after the collapse of the values of life, this humble wonder preserves solid ties with silence. It is this relationship which bestows beauty to mourning. It is not that the funereal dirge ceases to spring from life, but it is a unique stage of life, a moment cut off from the time of vanity; it can disturb the earth so that the dead may hear in his pit the voice of the living. (p. 65)

The thoughts expressed in the passage above carry the middle-aged character Outis to recollections of Greek folk traditions, reports of neighborhood ghosts — the ghost of Hamlet's father is also mentioned — that suggest mysterious avenues of traffic between the living and the immaterial specters. Outis was hurt in his school days, when his fellow students made fun of his name and called him "nobody." Now he feels happy with the name, which permits him to hide his individuality behind it:

Oh! What a nice push forward didn't Odysseus give to the human spirit by hiding his real name!²⁵ Sensing the annihilation of time in its issue, thanks to this coincidence, forgetting *tomorrow* and the time after tomorrow as well as yesterday and the time before yesterday, indifferent to the swift flow of time, Outis lived within the solid morning of the unforeseen. (p. 66)

From the sequence of the narrative, we understand this "solid morning of the unforeseen" to be a child-like state of being. This

²⁵ In Homer's *Odyssey*, book 9, Odysseus introduces himself as "No Man" to the Cyclops.

state is represented by the early morning or early evening; that is, before either the sun or the moon have imposed themselves whole on the world:

Inside this light Outis sees the window opening its glass panes like pages in a book, mirroring the bed with its blankets, the glass of milk on the small table, the pretty bouquet of the bitter chrysanthemums, the arabesques of cigarette smoke that half-conceal the door through which he can slip out. (p. 67)

In the two closing chapters of the book, the complete depersonalization of Outis seeks its sanction in religion. "Theophania" (Theophany) takes its name from the annual festival of the baptism of Christ and deals with the reactions of various characters to this festival. The Church is said to be simple and make no sentimental hypotheses; it opens man's eyes to reality without any intermediaries. A medical doctor offers an anthropological explanation of Theophany, based on the theories of Freud and Adler, but the young man of the group retorts that prayer and abstinence are the true wisdom. The last chapter, "O Ghamos" (The wedding), completes the notion that salvation lies in Christ. Outis fishes the cross out of the sea after it has been thrown there in a symbolic gesture by the priest officiating at the Theophany ritual. Later, Outis marries the girl of his dreams and builds a church.²⁶

²⁶ Cf. with the end of *The Dead Man and the Resurrection*, as discussed on p. 18 above.

CHAPTER 3

MARRIED LIFE

1. *The Expanding Self*

The word *ghamos*, which in Greek may refer to either “wedding” or “marriage,” is one of the key words in the writings of Nikos Gabriel Pentzikis. He often uses it metaphorically to suggest his harmonious and creative fusion with someone or something outside himself. The term pops up even in his dry descriptive passages to remind the reader that he has to do with a human person who acts and reacts lovingly to the world.

The real marriage of Pentzikis to Niki Lazaridhis in 1948 was another sign of acceptance of himself and the world. This event, his subsequent parenthood in 1952, and other developments in his professional life,¹ marked the beginning of another period in Pentzikis’ life, which may be said to extend to his retirement year, 1968. It is a period during which Pentzikis reached full maturity in parallel with the making of great progress in the development of his native city. Thessaloniki grew not only in population, but also in the cultural trappings of a modern metropolis. A society, *Tehni* (Art), was organized in 1951 to promote the city’s acquisition of a symphony orchestra, a theater, museums, galleries, and exhibition halls. These were indeed acquired in the following twenty years, while a new generation of Thessalonian writers and artists competed ably with their Athenian counterparts.

Pentzikis was often active in the efforts to develop Thessaloniki culturally, but the city continued to interest him also in more esoteric ways. In an important essay, “Thessaloniki ke Zoi” (Thes-

¹ In 1954, Pentzikis became the official sales representative in northern Greece of the Swiss pharmaceutical company Geigy and traveled extensively inside Greece on company business.

saloniki and life), which appears in *Mother Thessaloniki*, he dealt with the problem which a painter finds in trying to reproduce in his art the atmospheric nuances of the city — the cloud formations over and near Thessaloniki have, according to Pentzikis, their own unique character. The painter will have to take liberties, as El Greco did in his painted views of Toledo. The object is expressed through its "marriage" with the subject, the artist. This involves letting the eye see, through the gauze of memory, beyond what it actually sees. El Greco made the changes which he thought necessary, says Pentzikis, because he had to obey "the aesthetic law which stands as much above the natural law of immediacy as the soul stands above the body." Pentzikis saw art as the metaphysics of reality and searched instinctively for the aesthetic discipline that would give meaning to the different faces, often contradictory, which Thessaloniki displays following its weather changes:

It has an azure sky like the islands, but its fogs remind you of London. Her bay at the inmost part of the Thermaic Gulf, where ships from all seas dock, recalls, very often at dusk, continental lakes like that of Geneva. While it looks romantic through the trees of the Sei-Sou forest, the view of its inhabited quarters depresses you with its realism. The avenue of Egnatia with the triumphal arch of Galerius suggests epic, while you grow sentimental in the Queen Olga Street. There are side-streets that remind you of the quiet *petit bourgeois* poems of François Coppée, but elsewhere you get a headache from the heavy air, polluted, you'd say, from some corpse. There are interiors of houses that recall Dostoevsky settings, while the rear view of many habitations take you to individualistic Scandinavia. In Thessaloniki, everything starts, wants to become something and nothing continues as it started; everything is either interrupted or changes; classicizing tendencies mingle with arrivistic influences from the West. . . . At different levels, time uses one and the same piece of property, which may have been originally a church, then it became a mosque, a coffeehouse, a drugstore, a telephone center, a storehouse for tobacco, a restaurant, an office, a house of prostitution, a theater. (pp. 68-69)

Pentzikis painted much, mostly in tempera, during those years and held several exhibitions of his work either alone or in groups.

He was awarded *palmes academiques* for his work by the French government, guided French VIP's around Thessaloniki and to Mount Athos in 1956, and traveled to Switzerland where he made the acquaintance of the sculptor Hans Arp.² Eventually, Pentzikis became better known and was patronized by some critics and intellectuals. He published in more places, and his paintings sold better. The general reader, however, continued to ignore his writings. In the sixties, Pentzikis met and had fruitful exchanges with George Seferis, and delivered various lectures in and outside Thessaloniki. His title of *l'enfant terrible* of Greek letters persisted and even became ineradicable.

During this period, Pentzikis published both poems and prose pieces, but did not come up with a book until 1963. Too busy! It is a period in which he reached out to the world with greater confidence and serenity than he did in the years 1930 to 1950. Instead of being slowed down by advancing middle age, he seemed to discover new resources inside himself balancing a more resolute attachment to his native Thessaloniki with an enlarged awareness of the world, Greek and non-Greek.

2. *Painting*

The title given to an international exhibition of Byzantine painting in Athens, Greece, about twenty years ago, "Byzantine Painting, a European Art," was not motivated by the snobbism of the organizers but rather from their belief that there are strong bonds between Byzantine iconography and pre- as well as post-Renaissance painting, El Greco being the catalyst of this relationship. Pentzikis remarks that the Byzantines share with the Moderns (especially the Impressionists) the theory of complementary colors and likes to quote a French writer who has called the modern painters martyrs.³ By analogy, Pentzikis' own style of painting could be called Europeanized Byzantine or Byzantinized European. Jacques Lacarrière called Pentzikis a "Byzantine Surrealist" and found that his paintings present a "pointillistic realism" and a "striking dream quality" just as his books display a combination of

² See chapter 6, section 6.

³ In the taped interview on his painting which Pentzikis granted to me in 1978.

"the liberating brazier of images" and "the flaming rigor of icons."⁴

Terms, however, can be misleading, and Lacarrière's "surrealist" seems to be broadly used instead of "modern." In fact, restless spirit though he has always been, Pentzikis has not experimented with painting styles like surrealism, futurism, and cubism. On the surface, the visual level, his style remained through the years essentially impressionistic. He was interested primarily in color and even in his books terms that denote color occur much more frequently than terms that suggest geometric design.⁵ So, also in the period under discussion, design had a marginal importance in his paintings. In the older of these he painted with small curvy brushstrokes that dissolved the object into color unities. Sometimes the strokes were very small, almost dot-like, which created a pointillist kind of impression; hence Lacarrière's impression of "pointillistic realism."

Before 1957 the colors which Pentzikis used were mostly white, grey, and ocher. Later, he employed umber, blue, and red on comparatively small surfaces, 10 by 12 inches. He painted some portraits but concentrated mostly on landscapes and seascapes where the human or animal figures, when they exist, are in small scale. The man in the painting *Phalara-Langadha* (1953), for instance, looks like another tree.

To an art critic Pentzikis confided that he painted from love of concrete reality and that his painting exercised a kind of control over his writing and vice versa. Another critic observed that the poems of Pentzikis look like notations taken hurriedly on his temperas. Further, one could take Pentzikis' painting to be the visual link between his poetry and his prose. Finally, in all three activities, poetry, prose and painting, Pentzikis satisfies his need for a kind of rhythm which transcends him as an individual and suggests a national, religious, and artistic tradition.

Eliot has justly pointed out that a national artist can be rejuvenated by influences that come from outside his own land. This holds true for several modern Greek writers and artists who became conscious of their heritage and sought to determine this same

⁴ Jacques Lacarrière, *L'Été grec. Une Grèce quotidienne de 4000 ans* (Paris: Plon, 1976), p. 340.

⁵ This observation is made by Elias Petropoulos in his pamphlet *Nikos Gabriel Pentzikis*.

heritage from stimulations which they received outside of Greece. George Seferis is a good example of such a writer. In the case of Pentzikis as well, we notice a more profound awareness of his native traditions during his second creative period. The impressionistic character of his paintings is combined with a native Greek and particularly Byzantine pictorial element which reminds one of a long tradition. The portrait *King Amyntas* (now in the collection of Professor George Savidis) shows, in frontal view, an introspective figure that suggests the spirit of both a fighter and an ascetic.

Pentzikis stresses the memorial character of his paintings. Whereas impressionists like Renoir and Monet and symbolists like Maeterlinck register in their works their immediate impressions, Pentzikis paints and writes from memory. He records not direct impressions but tries to resurrect on another level the dead bodies of his experiences. The impressionistic strokes of his brush conceal his struggle to go deep into the mythical core of memory. He is metaphysical, a devotee of love beyond the grave. In pagan terms, as he puts it, he is a devotee of Aphrodite of the lower world.

3. *The Theology of Art*

Pentzikis said to Lacarrière as they were examining together the icons and murals of the Church of the Twelve Apostles in Thessaloniki:

All this, these icons and frescoes, the whirl of imagery, are a controlled frenzy, the *stigmata* of a struggle between the monk-painter and the invisible world. If there is such an austerity in the composition, an imperial road in the choice of themes on the walls, this is because one must control, preserve, strangle the devouring devotion, the language of fire transmitted from a superior power. Otherwise, there would be no art but chaos.⁶

The inspired comment on the inner tensions of Byzantine iconography is only one of many statements Pentzikis has made over the years on this subject, in his writings, lectures, interviews, and private conversations. Many of these statements, like the following,

⁶ *L'Été grec*, p. 341.

are found in *Mother Thessaloniki* and usually involve a comparison between the old and the new. The comparison exalts the old humility of the artist over the pride of the modern world:

In Byzantine art, poetry, painting, and music, life appears stylized. In other words, the human body, clothes and ornaments, furniture, inside and outside spaces, houses and streets, trees and animals, are presented not for the value which they may have in the present but as intermediaries that help us perceive another life. Through the centuries we came to identify the other life with the world of the ideas, which gave way, after the French Revolution, to various monistic conceptions and has become for us shadowy and ambiguous. . . . But the other life is not a question of ideas; and if Europe has forgotten this in its wasting of the moral resources of faith, we, who during four hundred years of slavery [to the Turks], preserved ourselves only by the conventions of our worship, after the fall of vain ornamentation in Byzantium, are in a position to know it, since we have witnessed the resurgence of our life as freedom, without any ideological rhetoric. By simply persevering, our life was able to refill the framework which we received from our myth. (pp. 61–62)

Here, Pentzikis reaffirms very strongly the validity of both the Byzantine painting tradition and of the faith that underlies it. He goes even further than that in saying that the fall of Byzantium as a worldly state was a good thing, for it helped preserve the purity of faith and saved Greece from the Renaissance and post-Renaissance positivist thought.⁷ Art does not exist for art's sake or for pedagogical reasons; instead, it is the concrete image of the other, the metaphysical world. Even the smallest details in Byzantine painting and the architecture of a Byzantine church treasure their own symbolisms.

On the other hand, Pentzikis often stresses that the symbols of Byzantine art and architecture are drawn from the world of the senses and concretize rather than abstract the faith of the artist or the architect. The fullness of the church architecture can be grasped only through the comparisons which it evokes with the sights of this world. The roof of the Twelve Apostles Church sug-

⁷ See chapter 6, section 7.

gests, as Pentzikis observes in *Toward Church-Going* (p. 54), the panorama of a whole city; the roof of Saint Catherine's Church, with its various levels and shapes, looks like a bouquet of flowers. On the walls, the setting of the tiles around the basic motif of the cross reminds one of carpets. Pentzikis stresses, above all, the rhythm that pervades and controls not only Byzantine art and architecture, but also religious rituals — a rhythm and a symmetry which spring from a mistrust of complete symmetry in the classical sense.

4. *The Poems*

Between 1949 and 1953 Pentzikis published in successive issues of the journal *Morphes* a series of poems which one may call "middle poems," as they fall between the *Icons* and the later series of poems, *Anakomidhi* (Transferral of relics), and were given no general name. The "middle poems" are more lyrical and topical than the poems of *Icons*; they tell stories and evoke legends that are associated mostly with Greek Macedonia, describe various geographical areas, and combine reality with myth, in an effort to enlarge the central theme by means of concrete detail. Commenting on these poems a Thessalonian critic, Dinos Christianopoulos, says:

The poem is now written and not simply put together, as in the past. It presents a strict unity of theme and its composition is more normal. There are still problems, but, whereas earlier many themes of great variety created a mosaic from which a meaning had to be extracted, now one theme is developed in the whole poem, combined with various details that give the poem plasticity.⁸

"Topographia" (Topography) is in free verse, but the lines are grouped in quatrains:

Higher than the houses hidden by mist
at the upper part of the square with the many
churches
(which are still visible from all sides
or were burnt and survive only as names)

⁸ "Nikos Gabriel Pentzikis, as Poet," *Dhiaghonios* 4, no. 2 (1961), p. 96.

about the middle of the hill where the city climbs
at the level, almost, of the Worker's Center
close by the Great Church of our Patron Saint
across from the swings where children play

at the spot of the ancient athletic stadium
(where the martyr, heartened by the voice of his
teacher in Christ

which he heard through the prison bars,
stood his ground against the power of the king

who thought material wealth was the ultimate
and went on building palaces)

where the Church and Nestor's tomb may have been
there on the marble piece rolled down from its base,
my love is sitting.

The poem provides an exact topographical and historical description of a particular spot in Thessaloniki, but the description ends on a sentimental note. This note is also the secret core of the whole poem. Pentzikis does the opposite of what one would expect. Normally, he should start with the image of the sitting girl, the poet's beloved, and then locate or describe the surrounding landscape outwards. Instead, we have a progression from the borders to the center of the scene. The description involves the story of Saint Demetrius as well; the Saint's blessing through the bars of his dungeon the Christian youth Nestor who, thus emboldened, fought and vanquished the pagan bully Lieos; and the martyrdom of the Saint. The image of the sitting girl at the end comes as a revelation. It strikes a purely lyrical chord, but we recognize that the image of the sitting girl and the sentiments it evokes have been pre-colored and deepened by the girl's precise placement in a space hallowed by time.

In the much longer poem "Symvan" (Event), a group of soldiers on leave visits a country chapel. One of the soldiers narrates an old story of the miraculous rescue of Thessaloniki by Saint Demetrius from a hostile invasion from the North. The soldiers gain a vision of the city not as a group of buildings but as a living person. The past comes alive and the present becomes meaningful. We detect the same process in the poem "Messa ston Paleo Nao" (In the old

church), where Pentzikis describes the interior of a church while musing on the faith which motivated the church's builders.

Not all of these poems, however, structure and control the poet's feelings around some historical or topographical reality. In the poem "Strophí" (Turning point) exclamation seems to be the dominant note:

I want to talk to you but I can't
o houses of the world, why are you made of stone,
why doesn't creation rise like unleavened bread
feeling the breath of the creator in the heart's beat?

Open the windows for the sun to enter
tearing down the fences built by men
so that the simple, flower-garbed hope
may rise to the top, a sign of God.

I want to sing of you, flowers of the earth
as I plunge my hand in the past of the race
through heaps of fallen dead leaves
to the stem that raises its head high.

The head that will be reaped at some moment
in the heartiest satisfaction of God —
reading it we are able to die
serene in our intimacy with another life.

The message is similar to that of the other poems, indeed of Pentzikis' entire work. The "other," truer, life can be gained via death. Yet the manner of this particular poem is unusually lyrical, dance-like. It expresses no doubts. Sentiments are not suppressed here. Like the "*Anastenaridhes*" (fire-walkers) of Langadha, whom Pentzikis often defends against their more "enlightened" detractors, he lets himself go on simple faith.⁹

In the later series of poems, *Transferral of Relics*,¹⁰ Pentzikis reverts to a more loose and abstract form. He no longer groups

⁹ The *Anastenaridhes* (etymological meaning, "The sighing people") of Langadha (a town near Thessaloniki) once a year tread publicly on a pile of live coals while holding their family icons. The custom of *pyrovassia* (fire-walking) is a remnant of ancient orgiastic religions and is frowned upon by the Greek Orthodox Church, but has popular support.

¹⁰ *Anakomidhi* (Transferral), printed in *Dhiaghbonios* 4, no. 2 (1961), pp. 29-52.

lines in stanzas of four lines each but runs them consecutively. Some lines are much shorter than others. These poems are very much like pieces of prose but they are also dense and allusive. They remind us of the *Icons*, with which they are also linked by the introductory poem "Horos Kimitirion" (Space of cemetery). This was written between 1944 and 1950. All the other poems are grouped in two parts. The first part includes twelve poems numbered with Greek numerals, while the second consists of only one long poem, "Synanastrophē Synēhis" (Constant association). All of these poems were written in 1960–1961 and they are Pentzikis' responses to the transferral of his late mother's remains.¹¹

The spade which unearths the bones of the dead stirs together with the soil deep-buried memories and feelings. The poems are like bones, so to speak, suddenly exposed to the light together with the insides of the grave. Images, thoughts, impressions, sentiments jostle against one another and at the same time struggle to cohere with one another, as in "Dhiastavrossi" (Crossroads):

Heroic home of a spinster
 a kiln hidden on the right
 became a shelter for poultry
 before the owners were reduced to ashes
 while they were impaling him she dyed her hair
 with the slippers on the red tiles
 she learned about the cure of the sick
 securing her happiness in advance
 sat on the only couch of the house
 shortly even the windows were gone
 they buried the child who had been ill
 the courtyard was filled with sights
 the dredging machine worked for the excavation
 the foundations were laid of a coop for
 migratory birds
 the vegetable garden was framed in gold
 the bridge got electric lights
 no more room for the couple to hide
 the carpet knots multiplied in the loom
 her daughter is near delivery

¹¹ These poems are discussed perceptively, within the frame of Pentzikis' total oeuvre, by Kimon Friar in his *Modern Greek Poetry*, pp. 106–112.

her second child was a boy
"in fact I am dead," she said
"I felt alive only with him"
the town authorities left
the wooden rail of the bridge
the parapets are of cement
in front of the stranger's house
the asphalted road forms a curve
the widowed mother passes with her son
dazed in the labyrinth of the little streets
wonders whether her husband is still there
under the bridge
amidst the stones of the dry river bed
she is anxious when it rains
in case there is a flood in the yards and
basements
of the kindly wisdom of the old.

Pentzikis registers memories from his old neighborhood as they come, with a minimum of empathy, found only in the adjectives "heroic" and "kindly". The gradually changing landscape goes together with the natural or unexpected changes in the destinies of its humble population. Men blend with their environment, while the dead do not vanish but continue to influence the living. The voice of tradition enlivens this prosaic world of common destinies. "While they were impaling him" echoes the death of Athanasios Dhiakos (a hero of the Greek War of Independence), while the reference to the dead husband who is probably still under the bridge brings up associations with the well-known folk ballad "The Bridge of Arta." This ballad treats of the very ancient custom according to which a living person is buried in the foundations of an important, public structure to make it strong.

All poems in *Transferral of Relics* are transpositions of things into poetry, avenues of traffic between the present and the past, between life and what is wrongly thought to be dead and gone. This theme is stated most explicitly in the last poem of the series, "Constant Association," of which here are some lines:

his hand searches in the ashes to find the beauty
he thinks that he holds in his palm the rich hair

his heart gets a fright and a flock of birds spreads
its wings
the hundred stars hang from the sky
the young man finds himself in a crowded city
looking from high up he thinks "undoubtedly
dead and living walk here together."

5. *Continuing Progress*

Pentzikis did not put a book together between 1951 and 1962 but wrote and published much in journals. Thus, he accumulated material which he brought out later in separate editions. Of the various essays and narratives printed in journals, some circulated also in offprint. After 1950 Pentzikis appears to concentrate more on his own work. He does not translate, writes very few art reviews, and has written only one literary critique, on George Seferis.

Several chapters of *Retinue* date from the early fifties. In one of these, "Enas Dhaskalos sti Limni" (A teacher in the lake), we find a duplication of Andhreas Dhimakoudhis or rather a composite portrait of Andhreas and the unnamed narrator of *The Dead Man and the Resurrection* in the teacher who drowns in a lake. The man is working in a poor community of northern Greece and develops the habit of walking in the country, reflecting on worlds brighter than his own. His deepest longing is to see Virtue come alive. He searches for it everywhere, even in the little stones of the fields which are reputed to help the growth of tobacco. He looks for it in the trees:

The bare branches with their varied divisions and subdivisions, or loaded with half-open eyes, the color of their rim dulled by the green ramifications, the leaves, the tendrils, and their many reproductive systems, which look like a fantastic feast, with their white and rosy flowers, knitted around his eyes (the way fishermen's wives do, sitting on the beach, and with the help of their bare feet) a net which caught his vision like a wild bird. . . . (p. 87)

The man steps into the lake and drowns, thus entering the gate of another world. Every year in the spring his pupils come and play by the fallen trunk of the plane-tree under which he has been buried.

By drowning the teacher achieves a mystical identification with the surrounding area.

A similar case is the young man of "To Onoma" (The name) (*Retinue*, pp. 82–85), who looks for something solid behind the images of things and tries to decipher the dry leaves which he lifts from the ground. Another beautiful narrative from the same period is "Vrohi" (Rain) (*ibid.*, 78–81). The fall rain evokes in the writer's mind happy as well as sad memories and stirs up his deep-seated nostalgia for another, nobler world.

Among the essays on Thessaloniki, apart from "Thessaloniki and Life," discussed earlier, one could note "Ghraphikotites" (Highlights), originally printed in 1959, and found in *Mother Thessaloniki*, (pp. 89–94), in which Pentzikis draws a distinction between Athens and his native city. The light and dry climate of Attica, where Athens is, encourages clarity; an object can be seen distinctly there. In Thessaloniki nothing can be isolated: "There is a coexistence of objects that creates successive fiery tongues of excitement in the horizons of the spirit. This is exactly what we can name, from an aesthetic point of view, color, in contrast to the architectural line."¹² The painter and the metaphysician or theologian work together here, while at the same time there is no violation of the city's meteorological data in the description of Thessaloniki.

Other essays from *Mother Thessaloniki* carry out the common theme: In "Apopsi apo ta Voriodhytika" (View from the northwest) (pp. 77–82), Pentzikis describes the medieval walls of Thessaloniki — or what is left of them. He notes the monotony of the wall surface, broken effectively by the use of various decorative motifs made with tiles, crosses, and occasional inscriptions. A blind window is made to look like an embroidery. The past and present life of the city are also treated in "Panorama ke Istoria" (Full view and history) (pp. 83–88). From the eighteenth century Pentzikis moves backward to the traditions associated with the founding of the city in 315 BC. In "Arhontikos Avloghiros" (High-class yard) (pp. 16–22) the discussion centers around the not too distant past of the city, when Jews and Levantine Franks lived and worked together

¹² There is a similar discussion in "Clouds and Reveries," *ibid.*, pp. 72–76.

with the Greeks. "Platia Eleftherias" (Liberty Square), (pp. 95–104), which provides snapshots from the well-known square of the city, recalls the style of *Knowledge of Things*. The street and shop signs are printed in capitals to make them look more authentic; then, the capitals are extended to words that have some special value. These are grouped with fragments from conversations, telephone exchanges, and radio songs.

All these and other publications exemplify in rich and intricate ways the two basic forces in the writing of Pentzikis: to salvage on paper whatever he can from the ephemeral world of time that flows all around him — what the reader first sees in Pentzikis are the floating objects of a shipwreck, some critic said — and to integrate all this into some higher pattern which will not oppose tradition, but rather validate it.

6. *Architecture of the Scattered Life*

Pentzikis launched this, his first book in many years, in 1963 on a note of optimism: "According to what I have in mind, I hope that, if I start a new piece of work, it will go well. This makes me optimistic. Optimism or what I understand as optimism is something indispensable to life" (p. 7). The image of flowers on a dead body, which we find at the end of the book's first chapter, is the visible equivalent of the feeling of optimism. This leads, in the second chapter, to the concept of unity or unifying rhythm among things like the flower, the rocks, the sea, the trees, and then to a thought that seems to echo Plato's theory of the archetypal ideas, which man instinctively copies or imitates in whatever he does.

The book sprang from a box of souvenirs. Pentzikis often mentions this box in the pages of his book as a reminder to the reader that the *Architecture of the Scattered Life* rests on a concrete foundation. Pentzikis felt, however, that his memory ought to be relieved from its material burden and turn into some kind of vapor which would lift the objects like incense within the air of mythic generality.

Started in 1953 under the provisional title *Settling Down* (later changed to *Trial*), the book assumed its final title in 1955 — a title that may serve as an indicator of Pentzikis' total output. "Scattered"

suggests disorder, shapelessness, loss or absence of unity, while "architecture" points to order and the collaboration of parts to make a functional whole. Tension between these two opposites underlies all of Pentzikis' works. *Architecture of the Scattered Life* is one of its author's easiest books to read. One is somewhat better prepared for the digressions from the main themes than in other works. The book was also competently discussed by at least two reviewers, Stratis Tsirkas and Takis Sinopoulos.¹³

Both reviewers stressed the nonconformist and antiliterary character of the writer Pentzikis, unique in modern Greek literature, and the remarkable vitality which he puts into his work. Pentzikis is like Gide, whose ambition was to include everything in his *Les Faux Monnoyers*, and like Proust in his reliance on memory. There are certainly many differences between Pentzikis and the two French writers, who are much more conservative and less aggressive in their approach. But Pentzikis has something from each of these two in his work. In another sense, Pentzikis is in search not so much of ideas, but of myths that will carry the reader to a wholesome conception of life. He reminds us of Plato, who lets philosophy yield to poetry at the crucial point in many of his *Dialogues*. The discovery of a mythical architecture will show the meaning of a diffused and confused daily life. We must look in the garbage, as Pentzikis says, to find the treasures. The following passage from the first edition of *Architecture of the Scattered Life* is revealing of the way Pentzikis' mind works:

Life is full of forms. From the point of view of clear forms, I get excited and pleased with the French theater as well as the French parks. I remember walking one afternoon at the Versailles. The statues and buildings amidst the plants and waters is a sufficient proof that the ancient Greek forms which — like a Jacob's ladder — helped Plato ascend to reality, gazed at one another in some new way that gave them life. Why then was I so intolerably sad while crossing the oblong hall of mirrors, a young student sent by my parents to learn and receive the best possible education? Why did I come to close my eyes not wanting to see? Why didn't my heart leap as I was walking

¹³ In the weekly *O Tabydhromos* (The courier) (May 1, 1964), and in the literary journal *Epohes* (Times) (September 1964), respectively.

through the park with the noble and beautiful court ladies in marble *à la Venus* or *à la Diane*? It is not long since I understood the secret meaning of that sadness of adolescence, which made me feel cold and button myself up. . . . I believe that the sea is salty because of the tears of men. I perceived that human destiny dragged me along like a sea or a river. Swimming in the water, I thought that I loved Plato, the Greek ideas, believing that I saw and understood their forms. But these were not fixed, crystallized forms, but fragments floating on the water towards me. That explains my peculiar attitude as a writer, my instability, that is, to let the stuff of my memories evaporate within the particular space of some form or of a group of interrelated forms. I am Platonic, not because I hold and raise high in my hands a form of the Athenian philosopher, but because I am as though baptized in the everflowing waters where the pebbles and shells of his ideas float. I cannot, therefore, see truth as the description of a crystal, but rather as a rhythm of the process which sticks together the fragments of the vase, the crystal vessel of myth, which, when in Paris, young as I was, I let, "imperceptibly,"¹⁴ fall from my hands and break. This explanation accounts sufficiently, I think, for the manner in which I work out the stuff which I draw from the world.

I can now safekeep, with an easy conscience, the things which I have inspected: first, a fairly detailed guidebook on Versailles; second, a series of postal cards from the same historical site, from the city, the palace, and the park; third, two volumes containing works by Racine; fourth, three plays by Bourdelle, which I read recently, and one by Roger Fernand, which I am reading today. In these, the great humanistic tradition of the Greco-Roman civilization expresses in mimes our daily bourgeois life. Continuing the processing of the material in my notebook I single out forty-nine people, of whom twelve are women. Of these, thirty-six live in Athens, eleven in Thessaloniki, one in Italy. Person number one spent four years in Vienna; number two spent his early years in Milan; number three traveled to Scandinavia and got acquainted in Copenhagen with the young student with whom he corres-

¹⁴ "Imperceptibly" has been put in quotes by Pentzikis, probably to suggest the concluding line of Cavafy's poem "Walls," which is "imperceptibly they have closed me off from the outside world."

ponded for years until he got tired of expressing his feelings in letters; number seven won recognition and had a career in Germany before Hitler, because of whom he had to return home; number nine spent many years in Paris and married a French woman; number twelve was born in a well-to-do family in Constantinople; number thirteen was born at a sea town of Asia Minor; number fourteen is in Larissa; number twenty-one spent time recently in Switzerland; number twenty-four travels often to European capitals; number twenty-five moved from a district of Athens to Callithea;¹⁵ number twenty-nine was confined in Paris during the German occupation of the city. I hardly know numbers eight, ten, eleven. Number fifteen lives with number forty-three, who is his wife. I visited them only once. This wasn't enough to make them think that I was their friend, as it happened with number six, whom I visited many times; yet I became indifferent after he had annoyed me with his views. Since then — It must be six months now — he left and I never saw him again.

I have heard a knock at the door, though I am not expecting anyone. "Come in," I say. There enters a young man with blond hair, unknown to me. A Leica camera is hanging from his shoulder. He introduces himself, but I pay no attention to his name. He comes on the recommendation of other friends. Yes, he is wearing a black velvet jacket which catches the fancy of my wife. I will busy myself with him, hoping to gain new wings, as it happens every time I confront a new and unfamiliar situation. I can forget myself while the other man is here. (pp. 64-66)

The starting phrase, "Life is full of forms," finds its echo and at the same time its verification in the sudden appearance of the young photographer at the end of the passage. The man in the velvet jacket is a "form," the visible equivalent of the truth that the world is wide and inexhaustible. The writer may have lost his sense of personal order. Yet the world still preserves its full potentiality of renewal, and it is still a meaningful and coherent whole.

As a young student in Paris, the writer had lost his sense of world order and was unable, or rather, too honest with himself to find solace in a philosophical or idealistic view of the world. He could

¹⁵ "Pretty View," a district halfway between Athens and Piraeus.

not pretend to be holding a vase in his hands when what he had was only a heap of fragments. He could only try to stick the fragments together, or at least grasp, even for a short while, the secret rhythm that governed them. How else could he achieve this unless he recognized and named the fragments, and unless he held them up to light? This is the meaning of his decision to enumerate some of the contents of the carton, including a notebook that listed forty-nine individuals apparently unrelated to one another.

The rhythm governing all those disparate elements was finally grasped, but not in the way one expected. The catalyst in the search for this secret rhythm encompassing not only the enumerated entities but also the world beyond or around them was the miraculous appearance of the young photographer. The break in the process of reconstructing the fragmented "vase" was also its new and striking completion. "I can forget myself," says Pentzikis, "while the other man is here." Yes, because the climax of memory is Lethe.

It was observed in connection with the poems of *Icons* that the memory of Pentzikis is both active, self-induced, and passive, set in motion by external stimulations. A struggle takes place between the forces of oblivion and confinement in time on the one hand and memory on the other.¹⁶ The product of the struggle holds the concrete image in its core, but it also courts mysticism. Pentzikis seeks to achieve a state of ecstasy through the monotonous, ritualistic repetition of religious formulas, or the monotonous and seemingly dull enumeration of data.¹⁷ *Architecture of the Scattered Life* resembles all the other works of Pentzikis; it is a work-in-progress that displays various degrees and modes of his self-consciousness.

On the more personal level, this book often shows serenity and optimism, the happy feelings of a husband and a father. Pentzikis' wife, to whom he often refers with affection, is the "other" in the way in which he uses the term at the end of his essay "Love for the Church."¹⁸ She represents his measure of success in the world, and she combats his feeling of aloneness:

I cannot believe in any happiness other than the acceptance of

¹⁶ See chapter 5, section 2.

¹⁷ Cf. chapter 5, section 10.

¹⁸ Cf. chapter 2, pp. 21-22.

the world which we see, complete acceptance, which makes you secure, allows you to forget yourself; you do not doubt its truth. The embraces and kisses which I exchange in such moments with my wife have a sincerity that touches my inmost depths. I trust in her existence, her little body dressed tightly in her clumsily sewn everyday coat; it [her body] is the most tender thing I can touch. I love it, I feel it is my own, and experience the same yearning as when I see birds flying with their swordlike wings and I want to catch them and caress their feathers. . . . (pp. 149–150)

Existentialist anxieties and mundane concerns, however, often give a dramatic character to the narrative of *Architecture of the Scattered Life*. Pentzikis continued to be during his second creative period a restless spirit, a centripetal as well as centrifugal human being, someone oscillating, like a pendulum, between extremes in his Aristotelian search for balance.

7. *Mrs. Ersi*

The Novel of Mrs. Ersi, one of the longest works by Pentzikis, first published in 1966, follows on the optimism of *Architecture of the Scattered Life* and differs from the earlier book in that Pentzikis is here less preoccupied with himself, at least in a direct way. This suggests a parallel with the sequence *Andreas Dhimakoudhis-The Dead Man and the Resurrection* from his first period, where one also detects a movement from the subjective to the objective.

When still in school, Pentzikis read and liked the novella *Ersi* by George Dhrossinis.¹⁹ It was a simple story of an amiable young lady, Ersi, and her husband, the archaeologist Pavlos Rodhanos. Many years later, in the early fifties, Pentzikis thought of reworking the novella freely, in his own style. He updated it by introducing into his narrative descriptions of dreams and time sequences which defied the linear concept of time. He also invented new relationships for many of Dhrossinis' characters. It took him many years to finish his novel, which we could also compare loosely with the Hellenistic and Christian Byzantine romances, those stories

¹⁹ Dhrossinis has been primarily known as a poet, a "lesser" companion to his contemporary Kostis Palamas. Both men were born in 1859.

that deal with the trials, separations, and happy reunions of two lovers in lengthy strings of episodes interspersed with numerous asides.²⁰ In Pentzikis, Pavlos and Ersi stand as the ideal couple, united spiritually, even after the death of the man.

"Monologhos para Thin'Alos" (Monologue on the seashore), in the beginning of the book, recalls both Homer's Achilles and Stephen Daedalus of Joyce's *Ulysses*. The characters stand at the border of two worlds, the land and the sea. The latter represents the "other" or "metaphysical world."²¹ Then the border itself is lost from view as the two worlds merge or blend together:

Picking my handkerchief from the bulrushes where it was being bleached by the sun, I refreshen the dry bed of my eyes. Now, above my eyes, on the forehead, a host of living organisms open holes [from inside]. Will they come out? I don't think so. So far, they are intolerably soft behind the claws. The very opposite happens in fact. The holes fill with sea water. The waves rise . . . slap, slap . . . dragging along with them an old shoe. On the surface of the water a piece of cork is tossed about, traveling to eternity. (pp. 12-13)

In the following section, Pavlos Rodhanos reflects on the intrinsic nature of the land of Greece while he and Ersi are at a Greek summer resort. The narrator remarks that the two characters have outlived their original creator, Dhrossinis; they are real people about whom one feels compelled to write. The narrator meets them also in his dreams. There is even a mutual exchange of eyes, as his eyes are transposed to their faces and vice-versa.

The appearance of another character in the second chapter gives the story an extra dimension. The man by the name of Ruit Horas represents the foreign influences on Greece through the centuries as well as the contemporary explorations in the Western world of the problem of time. He is somewhat forbidding in appearance and dress, has six fingers on his longer right hand, and is very fat and very old, but the narrator accepts him as one of his own people.

The device of interchanging characters and *personae* is typical in Pentzikis and allows Ruit Horas to turn into Dhimitris Mitropoulos

²⁰ Pentzikis' main source here was the *Myriovivlos* of the ninth-century Patriarch Photios, a commentary on the many books which that learned man had read.

²¹ Cf. chapter 2, p. 11.

(the late conductor of the New York Symphony Orchestra, predecessor of Leonard Bernstein), who is also identified with Mr. Kalliadhis, an inspector of antiquities in Dhrossinis and a fellow traveler of Pentzikis' Ersi. The bus, on which Ersi and this other character ride, makes a stop, and everyone gets off to pose for a photo. When the passengers resume their seats, the mysterious character vanishes from sight. Mrs. Ersi wonders:

Ah, it seems that their destinations were different. How many passengers had already gotten off? The bus was almost empty. "The gentleman sitting across from me, did he get off at Ayaia [a town in Thessaly]?" Mrs. Ersi asked the driver. But he gave no answer. "The man must have been offended that I turned my back to him in order to look outside," she thought; "he must have gotten up and left without saying goodbye. Or is it that he said goodbye without my hearing it? Strange!" She kept wondering even after the first lively impressions which she had at her arrival. (pp. 126-127)

Ruit Horas is of course Mr. Time (*ruit hora*, in Latin, means "time rushes on"). He moves on and absorbs everything in himself. Ruit Horas also takes the narrator out of his concern with the couple Pavlos-Ersi to the world outside. At times he even makes a direct appearance to speak to the narrator in a manner which recalls somewhat the apocalyptic manner of Eliot's composite ghost in *Four Quartets*.²² Ruit Horas says:

God's motion and action are timeless, while what we say and do ourselves, what he allows us to see, happens within time. Do you see the difference? A coincidence of two different motions within time enables you to admire the small octopus we've caught. No harm. You don't even feel the coincidence. Now, tell me, do you love this animal enough to believe that we've become one with it in the brief span of coincidence? That is where the mystery lies. Love is the only mystery. (pp. 149-150)

The one motion to which Pentzikis alludes is the temporal one: catching the octopus either for the sake of the game or for the practical purpose of cooking and eating it. This motion is defined

²² "Little Gidding," II.

and delimited by the mortal or corruptible element in human nature, the need to fish as well as hunt for food and the need to consume many of the animal creatures. The other motion, or rather a suspension of motion, God's time, permits human beings to rise above their temporal characters, enabling them to contemplate and acknowledge the deeper, universal rhythm or sympathy that governs the world beyond the narrow notions of life and death, hunter and hunted, human and animal, now and after. This motion or suspension of ephemeral motion is love, the capacity to pause and admire the octopus which you have caught, see yourself in his pulsations and realize that this sea-creature which you may consume and digest is in fact another you, another link in the natural chain.

In the second part of the book we do not see much of either Mr. Ruit Horas or Pavlos and Ersi. Instead, a new character appears, Sakoraphos (sack-stitcher), who is borrowed from a Greek folk tale of the same name. The man has clogged by mistake the tap of his own fortune, but a king helps him to unclog it. This is a parable of the relationship between Pentzikis and the Byzantine emperor Constantine Monomahos. Pentzikis found in Monomahos a model of his own contradictory self and enjoys referring to the chronicle of the historian Michael Psellos about that emperor of the eleventh century. Monomahos was a rather careless monarch who trusted in God and took no precautions for his safety.²³

Mrs. Ersi reappears to inform the narrator that the lower part of his body has been turned into a *phidhoborto*, a bushy plant with serpentine branches.²⁴ Pavlos dies and Ersi undertakes, in the narrator's company, a journey around the places which the couple had visited while Pavlos was still alive so that he, the narrator, could write down the story of their life.

The third and last part of *The Novel of Mrs. Ersi* is called "Anaparastassi" (Representation) and starts with a description of the church of *Ahiropiitos* (Not made by human hands) in Thessaloniki, of the alley behind it, and the square on its south side. This is supposed to take place before the journey with Ersi, during which the narrator

²³ Cf. chapter 6, section 4.

²⁴ See p. 61 below.

catches sight of a wall notice of his own funeral.²⁵ This stresses the unity of Pentzikis' work as a work-in-progress towards the "other" world, as a study of death toward a new life. Time that rushes forward, stringing everything behind it in memory clusters, now becomes a needle with its thread that changes masters before it becomes identified with the memory of the narrator. Conforming to this, Mrs. Ersi calls the narrator by the name of Andhreas Dhimakoudhis. She will embroider a kerchief in memory of her husband with this same needle and thread. As a consequence, the narrator is in a position to describe and reconstruct what has happened:

When they dance, the women of Megara [a town near Athens] imitate with their steps the sea and its waves. I am concerned to explain how in the hands of Mrs. Ersi, the fingers that pushed and pulled me gently through the piece of cloth, with the long thread which I dragged behind me blindly (for I didn't have any eyes to see what I was doing; she alone, bent over the white cloud, the warp of her patience, could see), little by little, just as the sea is completed by the simple steps of the dance, so did her fingers embroider our entire journey. (pp. 348-349)

The needle pierces the soft finger of Mrs. Ersi. The blood that flows is said to be the faith which restores to the narrator his human form. Perhaps Mrs. Ersi tried to embroider too much. The piercing of the finger was the crisis which resulted in the transformation of the narrator, his renewal, just as the sudden appearance of the young photographer of *Architecture of the Scattered Life* brought the desired solution in another occasion of diligent but inconclusive activity.

8. Seferis' Ersi.

"Nikos Gabriel Pentzikis is one of the very few fellow Greeks of today who interest me; his writing presents zones of shade which you feel tempted to explore." The words are George Seferis', from the diary which the well-known poet and critic kept while reading

²⁵ Cf. chapter 2, p. 11.

Pentzikis' *The Novel of Mrs. Ersi*.²⁶ The interest of Seferis in Pentzikis probably started in 1961, after the appearance of *Ghia ton Seferi* (For Seferis), a memorial volume of essays on the work of Seferis by various hands, marking the thirtieth anniversary of the publication of Seferis' first book, *Strophai* (Turning point). Pentzikis is one of the contributors to this volume with a brief, but most interesting essay called "Essoteriki Katathessis peri tou Piitou Gheorghiou Seferi" (Intimate testimony about the poet George Seferis).²⁷ Pentzikis does not doubt the seriousness, honesty, and craftsmanship of Seferis, qualities for which Seferis earned the Nobel Prize in 1963. But he seems to censure him for lack of courage, that is, readiness to surrender his individuality and mix with the crowd, join in the "dance." Pentzikis felt that Seferis must learn to humble himself and be reunited in myth with his environment.²⁸

This brief but sharp essay must have struck some chord in Seferis' heart. He took an interest in someone who challenged him, not in the ways the small challenge the great, but with the authority of someone who had agonized over the same existential problems and had some important message to deliver. The diary which Seferis kept in 1966 while reading *The Novel of Mrs. Ersi* was the fruit of Seferis' effort to come to terms with the phenomenon Pentzikis.

The diary entries are meant to be random notations of Seferis' thoughts while reading the book by Pentzikis, but they also record (in imitation of Pentzikis' style) other impressions which Seferis has from other sources during the period of the diary. The manner also matches somewhat Seferis' own manner in his critical essays. It is casual rather than systematic, penetrating, and to the point.²⁹

Seferis does not conceal his objections to the Byzantinism of Pentzikis, especially to his assertion that the fathers of the church are sufficient as a source of spiritual refreshment for modern man.

²⁶ *I Ores tis "Kyrias Ersis"* (The hours of Mrs. Ersi), first printed pseudonymously in *O Tabyhthromos* (15 March 1967). The book-form edition of the work (Athens: "Ermis," 1973) bears both the pseudonym, Ighnatis Trelos, and the real name of Seferis.

²⁷ *For Seferis*, pp. 152-154.

²⁸ See chapter 6, section 5.

²⁹ The interested reader may see the book *George Seferis: On the Greek Style* (Boston: Little Brown, 1966).

He also detects a certain contradiction between Pentzikis' frequent praise of the concrete and the abstract and confused manner in which he often refers to mythology or the literature of the past, even misquoting Mallarmé. Seferis rightly asks whether the concrete should not be defined as that which is distinctive, seen in separation from something else. In this sense, Pentzikis often lapses into abstractions, perhaps without realizing it. The reader is often lost in the bushy enclaves of Pentzikis' writings. "I feel", adds Seferis, "as if I am walking on a darkened distant road in the country, lit from time to time by the headlights of few passing cars: I can't say yet whether I am awake or in a dream" (*The Hours of "Mrs. Ersi"*, p. 31).

True to his early expressed view, however, that the artist should be judged on his own terms, Seferis wants to underplay the importance of his objections. Pentzikis must be accepted whole or not at all. He is an unusual type of writer who has read and assimilated a lot and has a "scaffold of faith" which rescues him from desiccation. His Christianity is spacious enough to include Homer and Pan, Saint Paul and the humblest monk of Mount Athos. History does not evoke in Pentzikis the sense of corruption and chaos which it evokes in many modern writers. His concept of time is like the motion of waves between the open seas of dreams and the shores of reality. His style, dreamlike rather than spontaneous or free, expresses not only the waves of the surface but also the turmoils of the deep.

Pentzikis' view of the world, as Seferis aptly observes, issues often from a direct sense of form and can be illustrated by the example of a Chinese classification of animals (reported in a book by Jorge Luis Borges): the list includes various types of animals like the embalmed ones, the ones painted with a very thin brush made of camel hair, those that have just broken their drinking dish, and others.

One of the final observations in the diary sums up the survey of *The Novel of Mrs. Ersi* most fittingly: "The entire book of *Mrs. Ersi* is a fragmentation of the self, the place and time. But that is not the important thing. What is important is that he (Pentzikis) was able to produce a rising goddess out of the fragments" (*ibid.*, p. 79).

The diary of Seferis on Pentzikis, a silent dialogue between two writers so different from each other, the former a high product of liberal education, the other trusting in magic, is further enhanced by a third voice, that of the late Nikos Kachtitsis of Montreal. Seferis thought it proper to include in the book-form edition of his diary a letter which Kachtitsis had sent him after he had read the original publication of Seferis' diary in the weekly *O Tabydhromos*. In his letter, Kachtitsis describes the unusual and amusing circumstances under which he met Pentzikis in the forties. He adds significantly that he had been a follower of Pentzikis (meaning, obviously, Pentzikis' style) before he actually knew him.³⁰

Seferis' *The Hours of "Mrs. Ersi"* is made even more attractive by the printing in it of a few illustrations and photos, among which one shows Pentzikis standing, with the lower part of his body hidden behind a branch of *phidhoborto* (snake-plant). The picture illustrates a point, already alluded to in *The Novel of Mrs. Ersi*, at which the narrator discovers that he has been transformed into a plant, when Mrs. Ersi tells him "what a beautiful flower you have grown!" It also represents the Ovidian process of metamorphosis, as well as the concept of universal sympathy among the various species of nature — motifs that occur very often in the works of Pentzikis.

9. Notes of One Hundred Days

In "Ghiro apo mia Zoghrafia" (Of a painting), printed in 1974,³¹ Pentzikis relates how he set out to paint a portrait from a photo of Constantine Caramanlis, the first Northern Greek to become prime minister of his country. He felt like a Byzantine hagiographer who had to be clean from worldly passions before taking up the brush. He went about his work in a ritualistic way. The twenty-seven coats of paint which he applied and the number of brush-

³⁰ Nikos Kachtitsis is one of the most interesting prose authors of the fifties and sixties. His style differs considerably from that of Pentzikis, who said the hallucinatory world of Kachtitsis belongs in the psychology of the subconscious, while his own is a "mythical" world. Although Kachtitsis spent most of his creative years outside of Greece, he wrote mostly in Greek.

³¹ In the monthly journal *Eftychi* (Responsibility) (September 1974), pp. 406-411.

strokes were determined by a numerical transformation of words from two sources, a religious book, *Synaxaristis*, and a secular one, *La Grèce de Caramanlis*, by the French Academician Maurice Genevoix, which deals with the first premierships of Caramanlis (1956–1963).³² The religious words were mostly the names of the ten saints in the Greek Orthodox calendar year that share the name Constantine. Pentzikis followed this method in order to balance the monumental aspect of the picture with the secular aspects of the subject.

But how did Pentzikis make up his mind to paint a living official and indeed from a photo? His initial stimulus, he says, was a satirical poem, published pseudonymously, that made fun of Caramanlis and his supposedly uncouth manners and rustic mentality. Pentzikis became upset over this and, since he knew himself incapable of talking “on an objective basis without excitement and anger,” he decided to break relations with all those who spoke with derision about the then ex-prime minister. Yet, after he read in the *Neo Martyrologio* (New Martyrology) of Saint Nikodhimos the Athonian about the life of some neo-martyr, his ill feeling melted away, and he understood that it was possible to reconcile the most contradictory things through a sympathetic consideration of detail. In other words, by giving love to each separate element of a whole, even if these separate elements are in a state of conflict among themselves, one could reach harmony in his life. In any case, the result was the painting of Caramanlis as well as the book *Simiopsis Ekato Imeron* (Notes of one hundred days).

The book is in diary form and came out in a separate, revised edition in 1973, but was written much earlier, between September 1965 and January 1966. Most of the *Notes* appeared first in serial form in the journal *Iolkos* (Iolcus) in 1966 and 1967. The subtitle reads: “Confessions aiming at the destruction of the [writer’s] natural identity in an effort to acquire an identity in another form.” In a brief prologue Pentzikis requests that the reader be patient until the last part of the book, when he will perceive the unity of the scattered and pulverized phenomena described. Note 92 indeed gives an insight into the character and purpose of the work:

³² Maurice Genevoix, *La Grèce de Caramanlis* (Paris: Plon, 1972).

When I started writing, I told myself that I might go on writing indefinitely. I had no prescience of what I could compose. I started relying solely on an enthusiasm which I felt inside me.

The problem of writing emerged later.

First of all, the heaping up of material with daily spadefuls got organized gradually and the grass started taking roots, just as the edges of roads cease to be bare very quickly during excavations. Wondering often as to the nature of the growth, I began to perceive that I would soon get tired and hastened to set myself as a limit one hundred installments. I thought that one and a half pages per day would not tire me. I ended up by writing, however, four and in some cases, six, eight and nine pages.

The number 100 didn't occur to me arbitrarily, as I knew my weakness concerning a formal composition, and I thought of using as an alibi, an apology, the arrangement by hundreds of chapters found in religious scriptures. Although it looked external, an imitation strange to the essence of the matter, the association with the church fathers strengthened my morale and flattered me.

Yet, anguish over a multitude of questions which I had about the project did not take long to appear: Was I going to obtain enough material of sufficient quality to fill the One Hundred Days? And what uniformity was the material going to have?

My criterion in the selection of my material was that whatever I reported should conserve and give further impetus to my initial enthusiasm. It was this enthusiasm which prevented the flow of time from scaring me. On the contrary, this enthusiasm allowed me to view time as construction material. I built with time, not with the meanings of my context.

It often happened that I would stop writing from a sense of duty. Yet, this mood would soon change, as I kept thinking on how, by ordering things, I would reach again that all powerful enthusiasm.

When I wasn't successful, I tore the written pages and felt disgusted. The result was a kind of cramp of the soul, analogous to the so-called spasm of the scribe, whose hand and fingers get numb and can't write anymore.

Let this suffice concerning the completion of One Hundred Days of writing.

Now, my mind is occupied with the problems of synthesizing what was said in the name of ideas which become harder and harder to deliver, as it is necessary that each idea not break, by any means, the impetus of enthusiasm.
(pp. 164–165)

The passage suggests that, in his late fifties, Pentzikis was still agonizing over the problem of expression, as he had done thirty years earlier. Spontaneity yielded to self-consciousness and doubt, although Pentzikis wrote more than he first thought he would. The magic number on this occasion was 100, not 3 or 7. Inspiration had to be harnessed and controlled somehow. On the other hand, the attempt at synthesis should not stifle inspiration. Apollo must come to terms with Dionysus. Pentzikis' writing rose and fell many times until it stopped with the hundredth entry. It stopped there simply because everything must stop at some point, in the world of human time.

Notes of One Hundred Days shows a rhythm that has to do with the recurrence, in specific incidents, of several characters with distinct personalities. The main character, apparently a double for Pentzikis, is Mr. Posnatonpoum (How-shall-we-call-him), who often wonders about his identity: is he a man, an animal, a farm, a garbage dump, or a sea creature? Is he married or a dissolute Don Juan? In any case, he feels that he is only half of what he should be, "as if he belonged only to one of the two worlds which complete reality." Other characters are Mrs. Hamenmoliv (Lost-pencil), the young Aoos, Miss Ino, and many others, overplayed with symbolisms of various kinds amid varied references to literary figures like Ibsen's Mrs. Alving (from *Ghosts*), Plato's Diotima (from the *Symposium*), and the scientist Darwin.

The tension is always between this world and the "other," which is represented in *Notes of One Hundred Days* by the more recent martyrs and saints of the church. These are called "source and axis" of the work and are graphically shown in the geometric illustrations across the title page. Pentzikis wants to pay tribute to both worlds and he suggests the interconnection between them by a drawing which he has placed in the middle of his book: it looks like an overcast sky at night or a night sea with the stars gone. The caption reads: "Effort of gathering the essence, fluid like the sea, of the

phenomena of the world described in this book, into the shape of our Lady's gown."

There are other such drawings which, together with the designs of the book covers and some other technical data of the publication — products of Pentzikis' method of combining numbers and words together with the use of religious and secular sources — abridge his second and third creative periods. Thus, the front cover design of *Notes of One Hundred Days* is a rough map of Greece with darker and lighter spots that show the frequency of occurrence, in the pages of the book, of Greek geographical names. The area around Thessaloniki and the peninsula of Chalkidhiki is much darker than other parts. The sea is shown by the use of wavy lines, while the map edges are filled with circles, broken lines, little squares, dots — the usual fare in the Pentzikis drawings of his latter period. The back cover has a design made of rectangles of various sizes. The rectangles contain lists of geographical terms that relate to Europe, Asia, Africa and America, terms which occur in the book. Below those, Pentzikis has listed place names in Greece, including the names of parishes, hotels, and others. On the right, the names are from religious sources, on the left, from secular ones.

CHAPTER 4

THE FILING CABINET

The third creative period of Nikos Gabriel Pentzikis can be dated from 1968, the time of his retirement from active service with Geigy. During this period, which extends to the present, one notices an even stronger literary and artistic activity. Pentzikis has also continued to make new friends, like the young philologist and artist Athina Shina, who eventually helped him with the editing of his publications and exchanged with him ideas in drawing and painting.¹ Pentzikis has been active in the neo-Christian movements of Synoro (Frontier) and Efthyni (Responsibility), has published several of his narratives in the latter group's journal of the same name, and has lectured extensively at the University of Thessaloniki and at various cultural associations throughout Greece.

In 1973 Pentzikis received prize money from the Greek State for his work and was also honored with the award of the Cross of the Phoenix. A representative selection of his poems was translated into English,² and, on the whole, he has received in recent years considerably more of the well-deserved recognition which he may have desired secretly but for which he never compromised himself.

The "mischievous child" has surfaced, however, in several of his encounters with other people. Pentzikis has continued to upset persons with neat and orderly minds, as for example at the first Panhellenic Congress of Writers, which was held in Athens in November 1975. His behavior there drew this reaction from a lady delegate: "The interventions of Mr. Pentzikis create an unacceptable kind of mirth." Pentzikis was quick to answer that, according

¹ Athina Shina had been the only student in her high school class to opt for Pentzikis in a questionnaire in which students were asked to declare their favorite Greek writer.

² See chapter 3, n. 11.

to some physiologists, laughter was the best exercise and that he was not going to dispute that.³

I had first met Pentzikis in 1958 at the time of his first painting exhibition in Athens. There was an exchange of letters in the sixties and early seventies and then a second meeting in Thessaloniki in the summer of 1976, when Pentzikis was sixty-eight years old. Though of failing health, he seemed to overflow with energy of both the spirit and the heart. Two more meetings, in 1978 and 1980, confirmed this impression. Pentzikis shows a lively interest in all things around him, writes and paints, keeps revising, expanding, and reprinting his works, exchanges letters, visits with his friends — the monks of Athos — and gives interviews. He is still moving upward to a mythical heaven, as well as stretching outward into the world of the senses. He is still trying, as he has put it, to make up for the fragmentation of his personality by religious faith, the "mantle of salvation in which the mortal body cloaks itself." In a Greek television program, Pentzikis was shown making a religious offer of his books, scattering them around a fountain named after some neo-martyr. It was a characteristic gesture that suited and expressed his personality.

1. *Tidying Up*

After he freed himself from his non-literary and non-artistic duties, Pentzikis set out to collect, organize, and publish in book form whatever of his past work he considered worthy of reprinting, together with new material that continued pouring from the tip of his pen. The immediate result was the publication of four books in 1970, including the reprinting of *The Dead Man and the Resurrection*.

The book *Mother Thessaloniki* — a predictable homage by Pentzikis to his native city — includes various writings and essays on Thessaloniki, some of which have been discussed or mentioned earlier. The arrangement of the chapters seems to be thematic and topographical rather than chronological, although the earlier essays tend to be in the first part of the collection and the later ones in the

³ *Praktika tou Panelliniou Synedhriou Syngrapheon* (Proceedings of the Panhellenic Congress of Writers) (Athens: "Estias," 1976), p. 197.

second. The cover pages of this small paperback show roughly sketched maps of the Thermaic Gulf and Thessaloniki on its north-eastern side. *Mother Thessaloniki* is a varied study of Thessaloniki, its geography and history, its people — the dead and the living, the famous and the unknown — its beauty and its ugliness, its air, often heavy, and its reflections on the mind and soul of the unnamed narrator.

The narrator feels a stranger in his own city and hates speaking to anyone, for "speech, the highest gift to man, is also a convention that ruins itself and causes misunderstanding." But he also recognizes himself in this same city, graced by the presence of her patron Saint, Demetrius. Thessaloniki may have started in known history, yet for Pentzikis it is also a metaphysical phenomenon, thanks to that Saint. It is Demetrius who redeems the city of its imperfections and gives it identity. The title of the first chapter of the book, "Prossopo ke Poli" (Face and city), suggests a dichotomy which is gradually resolved: the titles of Chapters 5 and 15 are "Mnimi Nekron" (Memory of the dead) and "Platia Eleftherias" (Liberty Square), while the last two Chapters, 16 and 17, are titled "Mitera Thessaloniki" (Mother Thessaloniki) and "O Naos tou Poliouhou" (The Church of the Patron Saint).

The final image of the book, that of the Saint Demetrius Church, seems to foreshadow the second collection of narratives, *Toward Church-Going*, which Pentzikis brought out in the same year, 1970.⁴ In it he combined older publications of the fifties and sixties with the texts of some public lectures which he gave in Thessaloniki in 1968–1969 as well as in other cities of Northern Greece. The book was sponsored by the Patriarchal Foundation of Patristic Studies, based in Thessaloniki, and can be seen as an acknowledgment of Pentzikis by the official Church, represented in this case by the Director of the Foundation, Father Stylianos (now Archbishop of the Greek Orthodox Church in Australia), a man of literary predilections. The Patriarch of Constantinople also awarded to Pentzikis the honorific title of the Great Myrepsos (from *myro*=myrrh), because of Pentzikis' association with herbs and medicinal drugs.

⁴ The essay "Love for the Church" from *Toward Church-Going* is fully discussed in chapter 2, section 5.

The nine essays of *Toward Church-Going* are printed in the chronological order in which they were written and effect a varied and thorough presentation of their author's theology and spiritual quests. The mode is confessional and the tone often lyrical. As in the other writings of Pentzikis, the organizational rigor of the formal essay is sacrificed to other considerations. These essays are, however, less randomly written than most of Pentzikis' other essays. Faith gives a free vent to feelings and we often notice a "letting go," a flight into a rhythmic dance:

I recall vividly the rather large mural in the small graveyard chapel of the Holy Monastery of Ghrighorios on Athos. The painted figures of men and women look as if they are dancing the *kalamatianos*,⁵ jumping along, with hands joined together through colored kerchiefs. . . . While our body dances, our whole being must forget itself absolutely in a lofty kind of nostalgia. (p. 32)

In the sixth essay, "Klironomika" (Of our inheritance), we hear more about *Synaxaristis* and its treasures. The more than one thousand pages of this work have been for many years both the delight of the reader Pentzikis and his main aid in the effort to understand the exterior and interior architecture of the Byzantine churches. In this architecture he finds the flight of human souls, of the builder as well as the sponsor of the building. By analogy, the old leather bound covers of *Synaxaristis* remind him of church walls overgrown with moss. But this work of Byzantine provenance, which has gone through various stages of expansion and updating between its initial creation and today, is much more than that. It is a treasury of the popular wisdom of Christian Greece and a good introduction to the Greek Orthodox Church and its sacraments. In his own way, Pentzikis is the last so far of a series of men (including Symeon the Young Theologian of the eleventh century, and Saint Nikodhimos the Athonian of the eighteenth) who tested themselves on *Synaxaristis*. Through his writings, Pentzikis informally updates that work and keeps it alive for those who will find meaning in it.

⁵ The *kalamatianos* derives its name from the city of Kalamata but is considered the Greek national dance *par excellence*.

Pentzikis' knowledge of *Synaxaristis* also generates new and interesting concepts, as when, in the seventh essay of *Toward Church-Going*, "Dhynatotites Mnimis" (Potentialities of memory), he likens the copying memory of a child with the knots in a monk's rosary and explains or illustrates the notion that excess of memory yields to Lethe, by finding a parallel in the energy which an artist spends to create and polish his work of art. He will be able to finish his work — be it the so-called "axion esti" (worthy it is) icon of the Virgin in Athos, the "Duino Elegies" by Rilke, or Eliot's *The Waste Land* — only by divine intervention on his behalf, and this intervention is equated with the blissful oblivion which excess of memory brings.

This belief in the artist's need of God to finish his work runs against the demythologization of man brought about by the Renaissance. Pentzikis views the revolution in the arts of the last 100–150 years in Europe as a positive reaction, existentialist in character, to the flattening of the human mind under the illusion of progress. He thinks of Chateaubriand as the first leader in the new direction, although Chateaubriand indulges too much in feeling for Pentzikis, who rejects a purely romantic escape from the problems that afflict humankind. He then thinks of Gerard de Nerval and the other, so-called "accursed poets," who tried to reach a spiritual world through the cultivation and refinement of memory. In their effort, these artists touch the unknown, the probable nothingness.

This unknown can be represented by the wind, the mysterious and intangible, yet very real element of life. Pentzikis reinforces his argument with a reference to Vardharis,⁶ the strong north wind that sweeps Thessaloniki clean in winter. During the Panhellenic Congress of Writers, Pentzikis was more specific on this point. Arguing against a speaker who deplored what he thought to be the excessively negative and pessimistic character of so much modern writing, Pentzikis said that nihilistic literature must not be rejected on principle, since the writer is a single digit, a "one" that needs a zero to become ten. Vardharis, the cold and obnoxious wind that blows in Thessaloniki, can be graphically likened to a zero, yet

⁶ Pentzikis also calls it Amphalos, conforming to the Greek tendency of Hellenizing non-Greek terms found in Greek popular speech, with the purpose of stirring the historic memory of his readers.

Thessaloniki could not possibly survive as a city of many thousands of people without the purifying effect of that wind. We cannot breathe without air, which, though insubstantial and therefore comparable to nothingness, is also a life-giving element and the main carrier of light — of heavenly and universal light, as Pentzikis adds.

The last chapter of *Toward Church-Going* bears the numeral 9, and Pentzikis might have accounted for the numeral by saying that 9 is, according to the Christian tradition, the number of the angelic orders. This chapter is titled "Synkekrimeno ke Ghamos" (The concrete and marriage), and in it Pentzikis explores more analogies between literal and metaphorical marriage. An interesting observation is that the darkness in which a marriage is usually consummated reflects the original sin and represents a consciousness of death, but also of new life. In marriage one descends to the deepest level of one's repressed memories and ascends, with procreation, to a new human form. Pentzikis weaves such thoughts around a description of the city of Cavala, whose mythical and geographical associations suggest marriage. He enlarges his discussion by reference to the myth of the corn goddess Demeter who, though patroness of marriage, loses her daughter Persephone for part of the year.

Pentzikis also refers to the story of the Byzantine maiden Kassia, who cloistered herself in the darkness of the convent and became thus known as the nun Kassiani who defends the holy side of womanhood. Kassia was beautiful as well as educated, the obvious choice for the emperor Theophilos when he looked for a wife among the daughters of Byzantine nobility. But he decided to test her first by asking: "Oh woman, is it not true that the worst for mankind came from a woman?" He was thinking of Eve. But Kassia was prompt to answer: "True, but also the best", thinking of the Holy Virgin. The intelligent response cost Kassia the throne. Yet it mattered little, since she was eventually wedded to Christ by assuming the nun's habit.

The overall message is that darkness, whether elected or imposed from the outside, may be a necessary means of purification from sin as well as the onset of a new life for an individual or even a whole nation. The grain has to die and be buried before it can

produce new life, as the Gospel says. Pentzikis started from this belief when he wanted to remind the delegates of the Panhellenic Congress of Writers that they should not pass over in silence or reject the dark spots in the history and intellectual growth of their country, for these were also necessary.

The third book to come out in 1970, *Retinue*,⁷ contains a miscellany of narrative material written between 1936 and 1968, the unity of which is not as obvious as that of the narratives in *Mother Thessaloniki* and *Toward Church-Going*. The dedicatory inscription that faces the title page is "gift of gratitude to Goddess Athena, well-armed Virgin, our head and leader in life, night bird in Hades, huntress of mice, teacher of wisdom, protectress of trees, light, garb of shipwrecked people." Both this and the front cover page of the book are designed and decorated in the Pentzikis manner: small squares, dots, curvy and broken lines and circles.

The eighteen chapters of this collection range from four to twenty-two pages, and some have been quoted or mentioned earlier. A key piece is the middle chapter called "To Onoma" (The name). It provides a concise description of Pentzikis' creative style, the continuity of his thought that leads him to writing and restores his faith in life. The narration here is in the third person:

In his room he tries to warm his fingers with memories. In the brazier of his poverty he stirs the ashes looking for some hidden spark. With smiles drawn from nature, the burial and resurrection of the dead, he tries to preserve in his mind, in a period of bad weather, the erotic fire. He apprehends the meaning of what is hidden, knowing that the sky, though draped by castles and ramparts of clouds, goes on embracing his wife [that is, the earth], even though the wedding gowns have turned into death shrouds. (p. 82)

Other chapters are not as explicit. The piece "Vorofryni, dhi-ladhi i Kyria Marigho" (Vorofryni, that is, Mrs. Marigho)⁸ comes out as a surrealist prose work in a style that recalls Breton and

⁷ The Greek title of the book, *Synodhia*, may be also translated as "Procession," "Companionship," and "Accompaniment."

⁸ Originally printed in *Dhiaghonios* 2, no. 1 (1959), pp. 22-24.

surrealist paintings. But this also has a place in the collection, just as does the long list of diseases which afflicted fifty-two people in "The Journey and the Stop."⁹ Pentzikis provides this list in order to suggest that there is unity or universal sympathy between the healthy and the sick, the fortunate and the unlucky of this world:

We are poor in results when we are counted separately. Man is mankind, not each one separately. Don't be afraid to be taken for weak and be pushed aside. Don't fear tribulations. Preserve constant inside yourself the common characteristic of man, pain, until you are transformed and divine the moral. (p. 25)

The moral is of course that pain, ours or another's, once sustained, leads to catharsis.

The 1972 publication of *Homilies* is dedicated to the memory of Pentzikis' parents, Gabriel and Mary, and supplements the 1939–1940 material with the texts of two lectures: "I Krini" (The lilies) and "Spongós ke Loghos" (The sponge and the word).¹⁰ These texts bracket a rehandled poem, originally written in 1937. "The Lilies" starts from the unhappy love affair of Pentzikis, but passes on to the subject of his literary writing. "The Sponge and the Word" investigates various aspects of the sponge organism — the sponge is the only living creature which is uniform in all its parts. We also recall that a sponge was raised to the lips of the thirsty Christ on the Cross.

Pentzikis added the two lectures to the earlier material in order to abridge or lessen the distance traveled between 1939–1940 and the time of the book's publication. With them he also provides a more serene and sober counterpart to the anxious and sometimes feverish character of the earlier, longer material and prepares us for the more solid reconstruction of his forty creative years in the book *Arhion* (Filing cabinet).

Before surveying that awesome work, however, we may examine Pentzikis' painting habits of the last decade or so and enlarge on the relevant discussion found in the previous two chapters.

⁹ Cf. chapter 2, section 3.

¹⁰ Cf. chapter 2, section 6.

2. Painting

Since 1967 Pentzikis has been drawing and painting in a style more or less his own, which, roughly speaking, derives from a mixing of chance with minute calculation. Both approaches are found behind much of twentieth-century art. On the one hand, many modern paintings (of those treasured in public and private collections) are for the suspicious onlooker probable creations of the artist's pet monkeys or at best his pre-school children. We need only remember the so-called splash technique paintings. On the other hand, many modern paintings — cubist works, for example — have issued from painstaking and minute measurements of space, weighings and balancings of color, and careful consideration of many other factors.

Pentzikis is original in his use of the words-and-numbers method, the *psipharithmiki methodhos*, by which the drawing or painting hand follows the ritual of combining letters (*psiphia*) and Arabic numbers (*arithmi*) in determining the coats and brush strokes of paint or in determining pencil lines in a drawing. He selects words from both religious and secular texts, mostly geographical and historical, then he draws their numerical value by adding up the individual numerals assigned to each letter of each word — the number for each letter being the numerical position it has in the Greek alphabet: for example, *delta* is 4 and *lamdha* is 11. Most of the cover illustrations and drawings in books by Pentzikis published in the last ten years have resulted from this method.

This method is also a link between the work of Pentzikis and the stylistic and symbolic habits of folk artists as well as Byzantine iconography, and it is one further step from the impressionist's avoidance of solid design which we noticed in Pentzikis' earlier paintings. Pentzikis seems to have a *horror vacui* now. The empty spots in his drawings are often filled up, horizontally and vertically, with crabbed writing. Pentzikis likens this technique to the silvery double tracks of a snail.¹¹

He has continued painting landscapes, portraits, saints, archaeological objects, and mythological themes, mostly in tempera, which suits his temperament particularly well, as he says. His

¹¹ Cf. p. 84 below.

human figures are, as a rule, framed by birds, flowers, fountains, and columns, in the fashion of medieval manuscript illuminations. He tries to transform the visual reality of his painting or drawing into an icon. In *The Mystical Bush* (1975) Pentzikis offers a new chromatic interpretation of the old Mosaic theme. In *Avrokomis and Anthia* we notice a lack of perspective (typical of Byzantine painting), but also many geometric formulations and rich colors that recall the Hellenistic romance of the same name. In *Ghalatista of Chalkidhiki* (1976), the town Ghalatista, of the peninsula of Chalkidhiki, seems to dance in the embrace and protection of the mountain that rises behind and above it on either side. In the mask-like *Pre-historical Figure* (1976) the heavy make-up of the painted face suggests ritualistic and magical preoccupations. All these paintings conceal behind them the battle or alliance between words and numbers, drawn, as noted, from both religious and secular sources.

Thus the painting *On Love* (1976), in the form of a solid cross, contains within itself three chapters from the Byzantine theologian Maximos the Confessor. Similar is the background of the *First Panhellenic Congress of Writers* (1975), a picture that depicts this congress as a holy synod. The head of the delegates are like the tops of pins. Every brush stroke equals a unit, a square is a six, a lozenge is a saint of the Greek Orthodox Calendar. Nothing is lost.

Page 88 of *Notes of One Hundred Days* reproduces the ink drawing of a mysterious round figure, said to be "the figure of Mr. How-Shall-We-Call-Him emerging from the data of the present text." This alias of the writer seems to issue through or from behind a web of countless small lines or daubs of ink, which may also suggest the soot that blackens with time the old Byzantine icons. Another web of round, white and dark strokes veils *Cinderella's Shoe*, a tempera made in 1975. There is a happy impression of snowflakes, the white confetti of festivals or the dance at which Cinderella met her prince, as well as the sugared almonds of Greek weddings. And yet the painting is actually the outline of the Greek province of Cavala, which looks on the map like a woman's high-heeled shoe. The shape was used as a matrix into which Pentzikis poured, in successive coats of paint, his impressions and feelings after a lecture he had given at the town of Serres in October 1975

and his subsequent journey to Cavala through the town of Dhrama.

In more recent years Pentzikis has successfully exhibited his paintings in Athens and has produced many more paintings and drawings: landscapes, seascapes, saintly and human figures on rug-like backgrounds. Two works of special interest are the temperas *Olive Tree and Girl* and *With a Return Ticket*. The olive is a venerable tree in the Greek tradition, for its extract nourishes not only the body but also the eye, through the oil lamp. In the Pentzikis painting a sturdy olive tree dominates the faintly painted figure of a young lady, whom we may identify with the young lady of "Synkionniaka" (Matters of traffic).¹² In that essay, the lady and her male friend riding a bus bring up the subject of the olive, particularly the so-called olive tree of Plato. The other painting is a remarkable piece of chromatic variations, a pointillist gallery of illusions. It may represent a thick hedge of flowers on dark tree twigs, a landscape with its network of roads seen from an airplane, the bottom of a sea bank, or rocks with their overgrowth of grasses. Its transparent lushness would strike one as the best visual representation of the entire work of Pentzikis.

It is interesting to hear Pentzikis enumerate the colors which he used in this painting and their letter values. He chose white and turquoise for the dual vowels; yellow, lemon yellow, and pink for the short; lilac for the long; natural sienna and burnt sienna for the labial consonants; orange for the guttural; mauve and cobalt violet for the dental; cobalt blue and ultramarine blue for the nasal; olive green, pine green, and emerald green for the liquid; and deep and light vermillion for the sibilant. The successive coats of paint resulted in a number of mainly white and yellow or light blue flowers with interspaces of earthy gray, or greenish colors of vegetation.

The final result in the paintings of Pentzikis is like an embroidery that issues out of detailed calculations. Pentzikis does not want to reach a rigid, classical symmetry — the pattern of brush-strokes according to the chapter arrangements in his books could have been different without any fundamental change in the whole work — but aims at a suggestion that it is the invisible hand of God, the Muse, or chance which guides his hand. This allows him to incorporate

¹² See p. 86 below.

into a painting a blue strawberry, originally drawn by a student who was unaware that blue strawberries do not exist. No matter, says Pentzikis. The blue strawberry adds a heavenly touch to the painting, for heaven is the only place where blue strawberries grow.¹³

3. *Filing Cabinet*

The *magnum opus* of Pentzikis in the seventies, *Arhion* (Filing cabinet), is ostensibly the result of a certain "researcher's" study and ordering of the contents of a chest of drawers, or better, of a set of twelve cupboards or cabinets that correspond to the twelve months of the year. This book is, therefore, a kind of calendar. It starts with September, the onset of the religious year in the Greek Orthodox tradition, and ends with May, the regenerative month. The ordering of the months in between follows a complicated pattern of criteria, which is explained here and there in the text and also in the detailed table of contents.¹⁴

Pentzikis started the book in 1943, after the death of his grandmother and as a means of consolation for her death, under the provisional title "Proghrammata ke Issitiria" (Programs and tickets). He kept working at it for the next thirty years, and it was only after 1971 that he gave its seventh and final form the title *Arhion*. This voluminous work is, according to its writer, a tribute of love. The dedication set in the usual framework of crosses, lines, and dots reads: "Filing cabinet, book of eros, that is love granted as universal light by the lord."

According to Byzantine custom, the ninth hour of the day falls in the early morning, the time of morning prayers, if one counts the hours from sunset. That is why Pentzikis starts the first chapter of *Filing Cabinet* with Cabinet 9, September. One step back brings him to Cabinet 8, August, the time before. Any beginning is always loaded with the immediate past. Then comes Cabinet 4, April, the month of lies. April symbolizes the superficial or false present.

¹³ "Mia Ghalazia Fraoula" (A blue strawberry) in *Efthyni* 44 (1975), pp. 411–412.

¹⁴ More on this matter is heard in a taped interview which Pentzikis granted to Professor K. Myrsiades of West Chester College in 1974. Myrsiades also published a perceptive review of *The Filing Cabinet* in the quarterly *Books Abroad* 50, no. 1 (1976), p. 214.

There follows Cabinet 1, January, the start of the secular year, month of education, since the thirtieth of the month is dedicated to the three hierarchs of the Greek Church, Basil, Gregory, and John Chrysostom.

Next is Cabinet 6, June, the maturing, self-reliant month, followed by Cabinet 10, October, when things are in decline. Then we pass to Cabinet 2, February, the month of the Carnival, when the other side of man, his irrational or Dionysiac nature, is expressed. Cabinet 4 returns as the true April, the month of Easter, followed by Cabinet 11, November, the true fall, when seeds are put into the earth, and then Cabinet 3, March, when the seeds sprout. There follows Cabinet 12, December, the last month of the secular year, which is also the month of Christmas.

Pentzikis breaks the sequence of months with a survey of material in rolls, wrapped not in paper, but in aluminum foil, and hidden in some secret place of the filing cabinet, the crypt. Then, the survey of months ends with Cabinet 7, July, month of maturity, and Cabinet 5, May, month of rebirth and new life. The ordering of the months seems rigorous as well as arbitrary or unpredictable, and, as it happens in the other books by Pentzikis, this strict arrangement is meant to compensate for the otherwise amorphous style of his writing.

It is true that *Filing Cabinet* contains the elements of a possible story about a man and a woman, Antonis and Anna, the ultimate descendants of Adam and Eve, who, however, go through a long series of metamorphoses — Anna, whose numerical value is 28, the same as the numerical value of the word *agapi* (love), gets confused with the eighteen saints of the same name commemorated in the Greek Orthodox Calendar. Pentzikis wants to depersonalize the two characters and often turns them inside out, true to his belief that in our times the contours of an individual are too blurred and that, in fact, we cannot speak of an individual. George Seferis, who once heard Pentzikis speak in this spirit, spent (according to Pentzikis) a few sleepless nights trying to digest what he had heard.¹⁵

¹⁵ The relationship between Seferis and Pentzikis is explored in chapter 3, section 8, and chapter 6, section 5.

The description in *Filing Cabinet* of wars and other destructive acts further expresses the depersonalization of our times. Pentzikis juxtaposes these with the meaningful deaths of Christian martyrs, which he also describes, sometimes in gruesome detail. The panoramic views of violence, conflict, and destruction reminds one of the *Apocalypse* of Saint John the Divine, while, on the other hand, these may be seen as reflections of the violence in today's media, movies, and television, as well as in much of the press.

To receive an idea of the method which Pentzikis follows in *Filing Cabinet*, one may consider, say, his description of the contents of Envelope Two, which is one of eight envelopes from Cabinet 10, October. In this envelope are fifteen items or packets ranging from bundles of used but empty envelopes, a visiting card, receipts, a candy wrapper, and touristic souvenirs, to memoranda with summaries from *Synaxaristis*:

1. Nineteen empty envelopes of five different sizes. Three are yellow. Three are white. One has red and blue stripes at the edges. The stamps are missing, obviously taken by some stamp collector. One envelope is intact, as no stamps were stuck on it. The name Anna is marked as the sender on eighteen of the envelopes. There is no sender's name on the nineteenth envelope, but the style in which the receiver's name, Antonios or simply Antonis or, twice only, Antonakis, is written, makes the identity of the sender quite clear [in other words, it is Anna].

2. An album of a series of stamps, Greek and foreign. All date from the pre-war period, between 1933 and 1937.

3. A telegram envelope, empty. It is scribbled on it that the receiver was not at home and was notified to hurry and pick up the now missing contents of the envelope.

4. A visiting card, apparently of the aforementioned Anna, which bears warm greetings on the occasion of some anniversary. On the card there is still pinned a white silk ribbon, which probably held a subsequently faded bouquet of flowers.

5. A small box filled with dried wild flowers, hard to identify. One is certainly the so-called "Poet's Carnation". Another, the flower of the creeping plant *Tecoma Radicans*, which children are wont to wear around their fingers, in the

fashion of gloves, thinking that they are thus transfigured to monsters of hell.

6. A note of a telephone conversation.

7. Receipt of payment for a long distance call.

8. Thirty-five receipts of registered letters from 1933 to 1936. Name of sender: Antonios Ninis. Name of receiver: Anna Elkomenou.

9. Wrapping paper from candies of German origin for small children. They are advertised by the French phrase *Double Joie*. On the cover there is a picture of Snow White. The dark head of the girl emerges out of a high collar in the form of a heart. (pp. 121–122)

Most of the objects and torn papers which Pentzikis describes are meaningless in themselves. Yet, together, they invite the reader to see through their randomness to the higher order that permeates and arranges them. A number of envelopes and postal receipts attest to a correspondence between one Antonios Ninis and his girl Anna Elkomenou. The pair evidently maintained a relationship for some years, as the dates on the receipts for registered mail, 1933–1936, indicate. One of the envelopes from Anna is addressed to Antonios by his pet name, Antonakis. Other items in Envelope Two are less amenable to immediate deduction of an associated story, although many of them, like the candy wrapper or a pretty photograph or an empty sugar packet (described later) are easily associated with the happiness of romance. The pretty photograph of a votive relief from the Acropolis shows “a woman gently bending her beautiful head over her right shoulder.” The empty sugar packet, a remnant of some hotel breakfast, has a note written on it:

How many such envelopes of sugar should be poured into the lake so that its water can turn sweet enough for Kyra Frossyni?¹⁶ How many of these should be consumed so that his mouth, which I hear telling me his love, will always be sweet? (pp. 123–124)

¹⁶ A beautiful Greek woman who was unjustly executed on the grounds of immorality around 1800. On the orders of Ali Pasha, she was drowned in the lake at Yannina along with several other women. Pentzikis thinks here of some Greek folk songs commemorating that event.

Even an anomalous eraser, shaped like a bear, is said to be popular with school children "when they still perceive life as a paradise."

Notes copied from *Synaxaristis* and a religious calendar transmute the themes of play and romance into higher ethical concerns. Monks who surrender their will to that of their superiors are likely to become angels of a very high order. Children who obey their parents can be compared to this same high angelic order. Other notes describe two different holy men who sublimate their love of women into salvation for either themselves or the women. The monk Avramios instructed his niece, the later Saint Marina, in a desert cell. When Marina ran away to a brothel, Avramios retrieved her and instructed her in spiritual matters so effectively that she became worthy of sainthood. The philosopher Cyprian renounced idolatry for the love of the beautiful Christian Justa. When later they faced martyrdom together, "they confessed forthrightly the true faith."

Finally, there falls from Envelope Two a note on the calendar page for the last day of October. Twelve anonymous virgins, who were hanged for their witness for Christ, swing in the positions of hours on a clock face and thus help us "understand where we are exactly in time."

When he has concluded enumerating the contents of Envelope Two, the researcher proceeds with the survey of Envelope Three and so on. The dry enumeration of data, secular and religious, with a minimum of comment may also be likened to an auction. The writer is the auctioneer and the readers are the potential bidders. But the bids are kept secret or are irrelevant, for (as it is hinted in Item 11) what starts as a worldly possession proves in the long run to be vain and corruptible. Nobody possesses in fact anything. We can only name and recognize the things of this world in parallel with, and in the halo which they receive from their intimacy with the things of the other world.

This is the spirit of *Filing Cabinet*, a work which one could also compare with the beads or knots of a rosary or the stages of a religious service, with the writer praying, kneeling at intervals, and burning incense, or further with an oratorio or a symphonic piece of music on the months of the year, like Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*. In the latter case, the composer has orchestrated the twelve months in

predictable but also original sequences, contrapuntal variations, major and minor keys, high and low tones. The aim of all this is to grasp the hidden unity of the world, which Pentzikis identifies with the rhythmic frequencies of things.¹⁷

4. *The Restoration of Andhreas*

Forty-two years after its first publication, *Andhreas Dhimakoudhis* was reissued in 1977 in Thessaloniki, with stylistic revisions but no drastic change in its story line, together with sixteen essays (some of them drastically revised) from various periods. The full title of the new edition is *Andhreas Dhimakoudhis ke Alles Martyries Hamou ke Dhefteris Panoplias* (Andhreas Dhimakoudhis and other testimonies of loss and of a second armor), which suggests again the progression of Pentzikis from darkness to light, from helplessness to confidence, from doubt to security.

The very last narrative, a short one, "I Synehia" (The continuation), originally written and printed in 1948 in *Koblias*, is a kind of epilogue to *Dhimakoudhis*, a happy end, in metaphysical terms, to the story of the young suicide. An unnamed woman who reminds us of Renée and who has lost in the war her husband, her child, her father, and her brother, reconsiders the past, when some crazy young man had drowned for her love, and scratches in French on a sherd of broken pottery the words: "I want to tell you that I truly love you and that I send you many kisses." She stops at the edge of the river where he has drowned and honors his memory by throwing into the water some flowers and the pottery sherd.

There is a complementary image, of a man ill in bed, who is cared for by a woman. The image, however, is not quite clear. The man may be in fact dead and brought back to life only after a memorial service is held on his behalf. The nursing woman seems to merge with the double of Renée, and the message of the brief and elusive narrative may be that the man's marriage to a living woman (Pentzikis married in 1948) was made possible only by the belated reciprocation of his love by a double of Renée; that is, Renée Saeger had

¹⁷ Pentzikis makes this identification in the interview given to Myrsiades (n. 14 above).

become mature and worthy of his love through another woman. For Pentzikis, all women are one. Niki who accepted Nikos Gabriel as her husband did so not only on her own behalf, but also on that of Renée of *Andbreas Dhimakoudhis*.

The narratives that fall in between the revised story of *Dhimakoudhis* and its happy afterword cover a wide range of subjects. Some are more akin to short stories or landscapes, some are pleasant narratives in the third person, portraits of named and unnamed people. The portrait of a girl who reconciles herself to the idea of a difficult mother; the story of a poor but handsome young man who sees in a boat the woman he thinks he could have loved, and the story of another man, an idiosyncratic reporter, who, true to his name, Jonas, dreams that he is in the sea. Other narratives describe the inside and outside of a coffeehouse, the problems which "clocktime" causes to people, a car accident at which a child loses his life. The child ends up in the arms of our Lady, while the survivors discover her miraculous icon. In another narrative, a monk becomes ecstatic not before the icons of his church but before nature, when he goes to fetch water from the fountain.

The more essay-type texts, with their many learned references and critical judgments, date from the last ten years or so. "Shima Loghou" (Figure of speech) is inspired by the theme of walking. A pleasant walk generates visual observations and memories leading to a strange conclusion, that such a walk is but the paring and gathering of the Virgin's fingernails.¹⁸ "Kopela sto Stathmo" (Girl at the station) illustrates the notion of immobility containing motion. The still face of a young lady waiting for the train becomes the focus of the narrator's perambulating perceptions:

Waiting, which is like time without end, stretched in all possible directions, makes the girl's face look like the geographical map of an entire region. Thought crosses it only in a narrow sense like the train tracks on the map. The further searches into the vertical and horizontal divisions of the earth's surface [which one sees mirrored on the face] during the indefinite time of waiting, constitute a myth. A tale with water birds,

¹⁸ As Pentzikis explains, "The Virgin's fingernails" is the Greek popular name of the plant *Ornithogallum Montanum* of the family of *Liliaceae*.

white butterflies, water snakes, and greenish frogs who, sitting on the round leaves of the water-lilies, help a princess find an auspicious end to her cares. (pp. 166–167)

Then, Pentzikis compares the face of the waiting girl with the shell of a snail and the train tracks with the twin silvery tracks which a snail leaves behind in its slow progression on stones and leaves. Far-fetched and idle similes, some readers would say. Yet, apart from establishing a connection with the journal *Koblias*, the simile of the train and snail tracks is also one of the most meaningful for Pentzikis. It hints at the theme of transfiguration. It also exemplifies the double process of depersonalization and impersonalization which characterizes all the work of Pentzikis. The girl, patiently waiting at the train station, trusts in time. Her face ceases to be a human face. It is enlarged as well as depersonalized into a map.

The out-going, silvery tracks of the snail presuppose the snail shell. Similarly, the train tracks assume whatever meaning they have from their association with the waiting girl. Pentzikis restores to the girl her human face, but it is a much brighter and broader face. She is now Nausicaa, Homer's maiden, who, by transcending the limitations of time "which distinguish between youth and old age, the expected joy of the welcoming kerchief, and the sorrow of the last farewell," is ready to welcome the old shipwrecked Ulysses as a long-expected person. The strength of the metaphor is also a key to the writer's own freedom from the prison of the self.

The exploratory twin tracks of the snail are as solid in their fragility as the steel tracks of the train. Both sets of tracks are means of reaching out. Waiting is also a kind of reaching out. In this sense, the train does not come to the girl, but is caught in the net of her perception. The same happens with the narrator.

5. *The Expanded Knowledge of Things*

In December 1977, Pentzikis published in Thessaloniki a second, revised and enlarged edition of his 1950 book. The full title this time was *Pragmatoghnossia ke Alla Epta Kimena Mythoplassias Gheographikis* (Knowledge of things and seven other essays of geographical myth-making). One of the reasons for the reissuing of this work is that the 1950 edition (offset also in 1974 in fifty

copies) had not been satisfactorily proofread and printed. As in the case of the restored *Andbreas*, the new text of *Knowledge of Things* has been tidied up and made smoother in style. Many of the original sentences, which had been impulsively jotted down on paper, have been recast more logically and with regularized punctuation. More radically revised and lengthened is the last chapter, "Ghamos" (Marriage). The revision makes clearer the miraculous renewal through Christianity of the pagan element, incarnate in the figures of Ulysses and Nausicaa.

The other essays in this edition, ordered chronologically, are forays into the geography and history of Greece. In "Mia Ekdhromi" (An excursion), a man runs the risk of falling into the sea and drowning while he tries to catch a newspaper snatched by the breeze. This happens during a recreational trip which the man takes with his family by boat. While reading his newspaper, he is assailed by memories and grows oblivious to his surroundings. At the critical moment, however, he is saved by the nymph Leucothea, who had also helped the hero Odysseus in mythical times. The nymph represents here the beneficent side of memory. "Me t'Aftokinito" (By car), originally printed in *Dhiaghonios* under another title, is a brief account, almost in surreal or Dantesque terms, of a car drive that ends up at the seaside with a hearty meal of fresh fish. "Peri Limnou" (On Limnos) is a learned examination of the land and history of this solitary island in the Northern Aegean, to which a crippled Philoctetes dragged himself alone in the Sophoclean play of the same name.

Pentzikis investigates the metaphysical significance of carrying loads around in "Peri Metaphoron" (Matters of transportation), while he provides a rich excursion into the past of the three-tongued peninsula of Northern Greece and its Christian associations with "Ena Simadhi se Spitia tis Chalkidhikis" (A sign on houses of Chalkidhiki). The sign is the cross found on the walls of many Chalkidhikian houses. The peninsula has been hallowed by the presence on its Eastern tongue of the Athos monasteries. The essay abounds in free associations and eye-catching digressions from the main topic, similarly to "Enas Kalos Peripatos" (A good walk) which follows it.

"A Good Walk" is a learned survey on the theme of the solitary

walk in art as well as in ancient and modern literature. Some Homeric verses that describe a flight of the goddess Hera are quoted for the occasion and subjected to detailed lexical scrutiny. The purpose is to show the elements of motion and action involved in a walk. The discussion continues with historical and topographical data and examples of characteristic walks. Pentzikis rounds out the theme oddly with the claim that a monk's stillness in prayer and contemplation is also a kind of walk. In this weightless stillness, which one could liken to the levitation of a yogi, the obliterated self is like a powder, light enough for the wind to lift and carry over the sea.

The last essay, "Matters of Traffic", may be read as an analogue to the essay "The Girl at the Station" of the new *Andreas Dhimakoudhis*. Here the key vehicle is not a train but a bus which a young couple rides among other passengers. When the crowd gets off to eat at a restaurant, the bus — a miniature of the world — is left alone to wait for the continuation of its journey. It may be significant to the Pentzikis reader that the new *Knowledge of Things* ends with this simple observation of the waiting bus, of the unfinished journey.

6. *The New Architecture of the Scattered Life*

The text of *Architecture of the Scattered Life*, reissued in 1978 in Thessaloniki, has been also retouched stylistically. The volume contains additional narratives, among which are five extended notations on the first five days of November. In these Pentzikis has combined material from *Synaxaristis* and other religious texts with information on the lives of some acquaintances and other contemporaries of his, whom he conceals under the names of saints. At the end of each notation Pentzikis prays that Christ may have mercy upon those whose names are so disguised.

In "Penihri Askissi" (Humble exercise) the reality of joy is identified with "the possibility of visual distinction of the white among the other colors and their nuances." The rain causes mutations in the coloring of things and may also affect, in noxious ways, the nerves of humans and animals. The rheumatic pain given to the writer by dampness, however, is eased by the thought that personifies the rain as the "nymph of heaven".

In "I Kyra Thalassini" (The lady of the sea) someone called Zizis — the word is etymologically connected with *Zoi* (Life) — dreams that his dear wife has left him. He writes her name in the sand on the beach, but corsairs disembark and step on it. A humble flower tells him that his lost mate is on the other, the white shore, "by the salty water which cannot be drunk." In his search for the woman, whom he eventually sees from the distance lying on "the white sheet of the beach," the man meets a butterfly, an olive tree, and a little shrimp. This last creature asks for his identification papers and forbids him to go further. He experiences great suffering:

The eyes of the man in love started shedding abundant tears. Sorrowing greatly about the division of his existence into body and soul, he kept asking himself, in the very depths of his heart, when he would join at last the Lady of the Sea. Could this happen at the waning phase of the moon, when the sea organisms empty their shells, or when they grow into savory food, at the time the disk of Selene waxes? Would this take place on the hither, familiar side of the Helios's mirror, or behind, in the mysterious area of Phoebus's and Hecate's mythical love encounters? King Apollo and his Lady travelled once in harmony with each other. But they came to quarrel very badly. He beat his wife angrily. The beatings of Lord Helios left on the Moon's face bruises black like the soul of Cain, which can be still seen even today, when the two figures of God's creation travel separately. (p. 44)

Pentzikis identifies the humble man and his lost mate with the sun and the moon, here referred to variously by their ancient mythical names, Helios/Apollo/Phoebus and Selene/Hecate. This is typical of his "mythical" mind. One also notes that "The Lady of the Sea" is quite lyrical, a narrative resonant with echoes from Greek songs, tales, and older literature. It hearkens back to its author's early days, a time when he was most fascinated by tales and romantic legends. Mr. Zizis is none other than Pentzikis himself, who, prevented once from uniting with the woman of his dreams, set out to preserve the "salt" born out of his tears in a lifetime's work.

CHAPTER 5

INSPIRATION AND CRAFT

1. *The Reality of Myth*

Plato's well-known definition of myth as fiction that depicts truth has remained the best definition of myth and applies to Nikos Gabriel Pentzikis' work perfectly. It is the concept of mythical reality, or reality of myth, which weds together the general with the particular, the subject and the object, the flesh and the spirit, the earth and heaven. On the contrary, human reason tends to destroy the essential unity of the universe: "Reason dissects and dissolves myth, bequeaths unbelief, reduces existence to zero, ruins form," Pentzikis observes in his critique on the French poet Mallarmé, and adds: "We salute the dead, while we do not believe in the reality of their shades. It is only through this salutation that they assume identity."¹

Myth is a surreal or absurd solution for unbelievers, but the true and ultimate reality for believers; it is the "other," the truly objective life, which does not deny the world of the senses but rather embraces and sanctions it. This is the very reason for which Pentzikis insists on what he calls the "concrete." He is so emphatic on this point of acceptance of concrete reality, substance, volume and form, that one is tempted to call him a sensual rather than a visual writer to the extent that all senses are extensions or refinements of the basic sense of touch.² The need to go back to basics is highlighted in the narrative "Humble Exercise" in the revised edition of

¹ "Ghia ton Mallarmé" (About Mallarmé), *Koblias* (June 1947), p. 84. See also Chapter 6, section 5.

² Elias Petropoulos calls Pentzikis a visual writer, in his pamphlet *Nikos Gabriel Pentzikis*.

Architecture of the Scattered Life: “. . . I had the great desire to lie down on the all-white sheet of myths, suckling like a baby the maternal bread of each thing's individual shape” (p. 195). Also, in the response which Pentzikis gave to a question by a reporter for the Athens daily newspaper *I Kathimerini*, on October 6, 1976:

Pentzikis: Ideas are false.

Interviewer: Even the idea of freedom?

Pentzikis: Yes, the ancients made a statue of freedom and the people who came close noted its pretty feet. They had a sensual concept of freedom, thus doing away with the idea.

Plato, the first great idealist of the Western world, was not different in his concept of the archetypal ideas (or forms), each one of which was supposed to have a tangible equivalent in the concrete world: “The ideas which Plato suggested to me had dimensions, had the truth of hand and touch. Those ideas emerge from within us and explode like flowers in the outside world” (Revised *Architecture of the Scattered Life*, p. 12).

Pentzikis believes that man can become aware of true reality only if he surrenders his ego, his individuality, that part of his nature which alone perishes. He can gain a glimpse of eternity, of timeless time, if he seeks, finds, and acknowledges the metaphysical or mythical world. In *Homilies*, Pentzikis states that it is in that world where “the subject functions as the lighting of the object” (p. 182), or as he says in *Retinue*, it is in such a world where there can be a sense of unity among human beings “through the mythical projection of the object within the subject” (p. 23). So Pentzikis accepts phenomenal reality fully but views it as a mirror or a vessel of an unworldly truth.

The incarnation of the divine in Christ gives sanction to the world of the senses. Iconography and, more broadly, painting, symbolize the “other world” and at the same time give a seal of approval to the realities of design and color. The light which the Hesychasts saw after long hours of meditation and prayer was “uncreated,” but manifest nevertheless. Blue strawberries do not exist. Yet, they are possible in painting, one of heaven's mirrors. Likewise, creative writing makes it possible, again through the interaction of myth, to fraternize with an octopus and commune with a

bear.³ Finally, Pentzikis' "mother," Thessaloniki, lives its fuller life within the myth of her patron, Saint Demetrius.

2. Memory

Pentzikis feels that the magic key to the reality of myth is memory. From *Retinue*: "We have all been evicted from a better world. The meaning of life is that we remember" (p. 28). In *Homilies* Pentzikis observes: "I remember means that I see that I exist at once with what has been and what will be" (p. 42). Memory will keep alive the image and the promise of a lost Eden. It will challenge, but also take care of the imperfections of this world. The young man of *Retinue* enters a church where he finds corruption and decay: chipped walls, sooty icons, holes, spiders, cracks in the ceiling. He tries to overcome the impression, but he cannot. He feels as though the man who stands outside the church door is not a beggar looking for charity, but a famished wolf, his fur ravaged by winter. The garden of his childhood is filled with nettles, and the town beyond is an incoherent conglomeration of stones or a mass of tired bodies. He wishes that he could deny the existence of the world. Yet something inside informs him stubbornly that the world exists beyond its apparent depravity or confusion. It exists, he feels, in the very bones of his fingers, the double bone of his calf, the liquid parts of his entrails, the cells of his nervous system. He finds relief in examining the bones of some dead person and contemplating what is perishable and what lives on, as Saint Sisois is said to have done over the bones of Alexander the Great.

In the instance above, the man's morale is raised by the automatic activation of his racial or national memory. The rundown church is accepted as an integral part of the whole town, together with some cripple whom the young man meets every day on the street-car. Through memory he integrates himself into myth that surpasses his shaken individuality (*Retinue*, pp. 28-32). At other times, memory will be deliberately aroused through the handling of

³ In Angelos Sikelianos' famous poem "The Sacred Road" (in Kimon Friar, *Modern Greek Poetry*, pp. 215-218), the poet identifies his own pain with that of a mother bear enslaved to a gypsy.

souvenirs, the fetishes of time. In *The Dead Man and the Resurrection* he says: "I try to include in my writing small details which I have noted, because I feel that it is only in this way that my life, fragmented by daily contradictions, can assume a certain unity" (p. 52). In the essay "The Sponge and the Word", Pentzikis defines memory as that energy which "straightens the spiral array of the particles of living matter" (*Homilies*, p. 193). One could also liken Pentzikis' memory in action to a garbage-collector (he often calls himself a garbage-dump), a spherical or cylindrical garbage-collecting machine that works its way, in a linear fashion, through space and time. It mixes together all that it picks up, shapes this garbage into a ball and recycles it into the world. Transforming and recycling its material, the ever-turning machine of memory suggests the non-linear but spherical time, the open-ended eternity which we can call "the world of myth."

In *Filing Cabinet* Pentzikis represents memory symbolically by the tears of regret that connect the past with the future. One could associate this juncture between past and future with another thought found in the same work: faith in the Cross permits us to view life as a forward performance, an acting out of man's nature, and as a backward movement, the reverse road of repentance (p. 167). The identity of forward with reverse movement helps us understand the startling statement, which Pentzikis often makes, that the present is the past of memory. The ongoing or eternal domain of memory is ahead of all linear time. The present is the point from which the road of repentance starts; hence, the present becomes the past of memory. So viewed, memory can be also identified with T. S. Eliot's "still point of the turning world" or with the very opposite of memory, Lethe, the oblivion of all that annoys, divides, and fragments man's life and his vision of God (*Toward Church-Going*, p. 110).

3. *Style as Labor*

The road of memory may lead to the light, but it has first to cross darkness, where all sorts of dangers lurk. It is because of his memories that Mr. Pipis of "An Excursion" loses his sense of the

environment and almost falls into the sea and drowns.⁴ Memorializing the past is not an easy, but a laborious process.

In trying to follow Pentzikis' progression through the years, one cannot fail to notice his struggle with the art of writing. It is not in fact surprising that someone like him, well-read in world literature, came often to grieve at his own inability or lack of confidence in finishing off a story or rounding out his thoughts aesthetically and with gusto. The secret desire of Pentzikis was early to be a great literary craftsman. Yet, he ended up fleeing the pure and aesthetic form as a sin. In this he resembles Giacometti who suppresses the flesh under the angular structures of his statues.

Pentzikis came to feel that too many have labored too much in the aesthetic representation of the world; he says in *Homilies*:

Neither the old style of fiction nor the new one, Joyce's, are capable of helping me. Possibly, because I do not know these well enough. I hesitate to be an imitator, though I am used to wearing strange clothes and I put on an old shirt discarded by someone richer than I. The thought that it was not made for me does not make me comfortable. The shirt is so large that every now and then I have to tighten my belt. I therefore dare, now that I am alone, to take off my body whatever is strange. I will not miss the opportunity. Not that I look very handsome in the nude. I do not, but it does not matter. As I have gotten used to showering every day, I can clean myself from my sins. (pp. 10-11)

Literary composition is deprecated more openly in *The Dead Man and the Resurrection*:

In the final analysis, what is the use of literature? Isn't it in fact a sickly consequence of the times, an outlet to boredom, a passion unknown to great ages, when expression flowed effortlessly from action? With the help of this or that ideology we keep searching for stimulants to our feelings, which we value too much and are afraid to forsake. (p. 19)

Withdrawal from inherited beauties, however, cannot be painless. Stripping off strange clothes, the mortification of good taste acquired from education, meant difficult sacrifices on the part of an

⁴ Cf. chapter 4, p. 85.

ambitious writer like Pentzikis. But he had no choice. He perceived that by aspiring to an ideal synthesis of his experiences, he would have to be selective. He would have to leave out much of what he felt was worthy of inclusion in his writing and also be imitative of his favorite authors. In our time of fragmentation and uncertainty, true synthesis was not possible for someone like him. Therefore, everything had to be admitted into his ark, the finished product of his pen, for the creation of a "non-style that is the man," as Kimon Friar put it in his *Modern Greek Poetry* (p. 110).

A simple way of paying tribute to the world at large is to handle a bunch of souvenirs. It makes no difference that the souvenirs are more or less personal, for originally it was chance that made the selection. Indeed, the writer feels that he himself is a product of chance, and this same chance may communicate to him its deeper meanings if he is not too selective; observe this passage from *The Architecture of the Scattered Life*:

Arranging souvenirs made me feel that in some way I communed in a lively way with those things that were but dead matter. In the name of such a strong sentimental need I denied myself any logical method. I preferred to appear insane — that is what they called me — rather than deny that darkness full of sensations, where I felt I could move about seeking hope. There is nothing more voluptuous than that. I could walk forward in that small but soothing light, color of honey, that showed me the way far ahead in the distant horizon. (p. 43)

A writer like Pentzikis who writes not for the sake of literary form, not in the service of a literary tradition, not for making money — a Somerset Maugham who writes for the millions in order to make millions — nor for some political or social reason, must by necessity write to satisfy more fundamental needs, as fundamental as breathing or moving about.

The deeper necessities or impulses which underlie the writing (and also painting) of Pentzikis are: the need for play; the need to know and treat the world as an object that can be learned best through observation, experiment, and rational thought; and the need to have and cultivate a myth which will sanction and harmonize the other two needs. These three needs, impulses, or aspects of Pentzikis' psyche are usually expressed in his works in juxtaposi-

tion, alternation, or even conflict with one another. Inside Pentzikis the child constantly fights with the adult, the rational man, as well as with the seer or prophet. Hence, the feeling of hard, relentless labor that emanates most often from his writing.

Pentzikis' incapacity to write pleasingly — something which he himself often deplors — comes, to a large extent, from a deeper honesty. He does not want to achieve artifice of order, falsify reality, and disguise the fact that today the world appears to be chaotic. Ezra Pound's Mauberley was distracted by aesthetics and missed "the mottoes on sundials."⁵ A host of writers in the thirties were captivated by the politics of the left, only to recant or reconsider them later. Others, like Pentzikis' fellow-Greek, Nikos Kazantzakis, pushed their romanticism to its logical conclusion, nihilism.

An open-eyed child of his era, Pentzikis has sensed, like his contemporaries Joyce, Picasso, and Stravinsky, that the primary function of the artist today is to dig deep into the areas of the human soul which lie beneath ordinary consciousness and to discover or rediscover some unifying myth. Pentzikis rediscovered and reembraced Greek Orthodoxy, the myth that nourished both his youth and, for long centuries, his entire nation. Yet he is much more than a Greek Orthodox who reaffirms his faith.

4. *In the Whirl of Sources*

The laborious side of Pentzikis' writing also appears in the number and variety of his sources. It has been shown already that Pentzikis is open to the world and stimulated by all types of data. It would take long hours to sort out and order, for example, the little- or well-known figures of people from the past, whom he discusses or merely mentions in one book, *Filing Cabinet*. The same is true of the books and art works which he cites in particular contexts, of scientific and cultural phenomena, customs, points of history, antiquarian details and modern trivia, religious rituals, features of architecture, and others. There is no end. In fact, it might take many hundred pages to study Pentzikis' sources methodically. For this reason, we will discuss two of his sources, folk tradition and

⁵ "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley (Life and Contacts)," in *Ezra Pound: Selected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1959), p. 173.

botany, and then we will examine Pentzikis' relationship with the modern media of communication, from where many writers of today draw, consciously or unconsciously, much of their material as well as stylistic devices.

It will not do to see Pentzikis as a detached but sympathetic and appreciative observer of the traditions of his land. His interest in coloring his narratives with folk tales and bits of information that relate to folk arts and crafts is not merely aesthetic. He feels that folklore has an inherent value; that it harbors an age-long wisdom and a deep-seated faith in life. In *The Dead Man and the Resurrection* the alienated hero notices on a trunk the embroidery — still found in some Greek houses — of a cross, an anchor, and a heart, that symbolize faith, hope, and mercy. This boosts his morale.

Plato blamed the weakening of memory to the invention of writing. By analogy, one might say that Pentzikis is attracted by the folklore of his people because in folklore memory works in its purest form. It is an archetypal, collective, and unifying memory which enlarges or reinforces personal experience. Pentzikis found it significant, for instance, that on the day recounted in *Homilies* (p. 173), on which he broke relations with the young lady whom he loved, the drinking glass he used broke into two whole pieces. The superstitious association of the two probably unrelated events suggests both the popular mentality which Pentzikis wants to honor as well as his own essentially symbolic or mythical mind.

Tales are freer vehicles of imagination than personal reminiscences, and Pentzikis easily passes from the latter to the former.⁶ The spontaneous creativity of the primitive mind appeals to him very much. The young man of "The Journey and the Stop" walks several miles in order to recapture his childhood and "find shelter in his memories." He recalls that as a child he and a friend had given names — many of them borrowed from books — to the things that surrounded them. In *Retinue* he reminisces:

They were fond of whatever they saw and they would name it in order to preserve its memory. They even gave a name to the swift and light step of a shepherd, who, treading ahead of them on leaves of holly trees one evening that they had gotten lost,

⁶ This was also noted by Watson in his essay "A Thessalonian — N. G. Pentzikis" (see chapter 1, n. 2).

led them to the right path. They sought and found the scanty rivulets of water with the eagerness of the explorers that reached the Victoria Falls in the Zambezi river, the smoke that thunders, as the natives of Rhodesia called it. (pp. 20–21)

The onomatopoeic and mythopoeic qualities of the folk mind overcome easily the limitations of space and time. Greek folk tradition has identified the Odysseus of Homer with the Christian prophet and saint Elias, whose small chapels stud most of the Greek mountain tops. Both men, according to this tradition, were fed up with the sea and its perils. They shouldered an oar and set out to find and mark a spot of land, as far removed from the sea as it could be, where they could settle. For Pentzikis, who mentions the story more than once, this is more than a colorful piece of folklore or another example of religious syncretism. There is a soul, an *anima*, in the Greek landscape; a spirit which has undergone many transformations through the centuries, but has remained basically the same. It stresses continuity and suggests the eternity of myth.

Several of the narratives which Pentzikis has written in recent years, like those appended to the revised editions of his older books, are pointedly mythopoeic. "The Lady of the Sea," partly summarized earlier, is the best example.⁷ But also in "Epetios" (Anniversary) events from the *Synaxari* (Life story) of Saint Clement are recast in the manner of a fairy-tale. The former sinner Clement wears out six pairs of shoes on his way to the "other shore," is given his directions by animals of the land and the sea, is eaten up by birds of prey while the "luggage" of his sins is consumed by fire. Next, we see him lying on the shore, invested in the rustle of the Virgin's cast-away clothes, and finally lighting his candle and paying reverence to the holy icons in the Virgin's church.

In "Phaini ke Nikodhimos" (The Luminous One and Nicodem) Pentzikis reworks the story of the beautiful maiden under a curse who is rescued by a handsome and valiant man. The maiden and the man, who are anonymous, go through a series of transformations before they redeem each other through love and faith and assume their proper names. Her name, "The Luminous One", is self-explanatory, while his is meant to honor Saint Nikodhimos the

⁷ See chapter 4, p. 87.

Athonian. Pentzikis reworks the traditional story with many new associations and colorful details.

Botany is a science which Pentzikis has studied professionally and of which he has an extensive knowledge. He will often mention in his writings particular plants and herbs, quoting as a rule both their scientific and popular names. He brings these up as items of curiosity or in order to illustrate some point. But most interesting are those cases where Pentzikis suggests mystical connections between his heroes and the vegetation of this earth. We may recall the gesture of Andhreas Dhimakoudhis treasuring a tree leaf in his wallet and the photo of Pentzikis behind a branch of the "snake-plant" shown in Seferis' *The Hours of "Mrs. Ersi"*, the identification of the Greek Macedonian teacher with the trees of his land in "A Teacher in the Lake," and also the comparison of the gradually emerging *Notes of One Hundred Days* with grass taking root.

Pentzikis carries the mystical identification between man and plant much further in a passage of *Homilies*, where he observes that at Pentecost people kneel by custom upon walnut tree leaves and pray for the dead. A walnut looks like a human brain, while its shell may be likened to a boat. The wood is good for furniture and coffins and for the chests where maidens keep their trousseaux. Kneeling on these leaves is like wedding yourself to your dead (pp. 139-140).

Quite attractive are some of Pentzikis' comparisons of people with plants and flowers. The girl Helen of "Anixi" (Spring) from the revised version of *Andhreas Dhimakoudhis* has a body slim and tall like a new tree before they take it out of the greenhouse (p. 128), while cripples are like flowers preserved only by the generosity of the soil. The latter simile precedes this passage from *Notes of One Hundred Days*:

On discovering on Olympus, the seat of the ancient Twelve Gods, some rare kind of plant that protruded from inside the cracks of the rocks like a violet sun, a botanist thought of how many millions of years of life and efforts of adaptation to the constant geo-architectural disturbances in the outer shell of the earth were represented by that monument of a flower, and bent down to kiss it. (p. 93)

It is finally botany that suggested to the poet Nikos Karouzos the title for his brief but perceptive critique "O Polyvotanos Pentzikis" (Pentzikis of 'many herbs').⁸ Karouzos sees the work of Pentzikis as a field of many herbs, some of them rare and exotic. As for Pentzikis himself — who was once seen walking in the street and reading a newspaper in the light of a candle fixed in the little pocket of his jacket — Karouzos considers him as the projector of a new, yet also old and simple style of life.

5. *Influence of the Media*

Pentzikis is mainly a reading and writing animal. Numerous times he alludes or refers to written sources, old and new, while he mentions the modern media of the radio, television, and the cinema in an off-handed way. In the latter cases, he either draws a contrast between modern times and the realities of the past or uses references to the modern media as details in his descriptions.

A sensitive receptor like Pentzikis, however, was bound to pay honor somehow to the machine age and the proliferation of the modern communications media. This he does through his style. His idiosyncratic style cannot be explained simply by the influence of the loose and anecdotal manner of his beloved Byzantine chronographers, his impatient character, and his decision to shun traditional aesthetic form. Jumping with agility from one thing to the other in his narratives is like turning the knobs of a radio or television set. This is a more drastic procedure than moving one's eyes across and down the page of a newspaper.

The futurists spoke of the "suffering of an electric lamp which, with spasmodic starts, shrieks out the most heart-rending expression of color."⁹ Pentzikis has not gone so far as to personify modern technological realities in this fashion, although he often personifies plants and geographical areas. Taken in its totality, however, the work of Pentzikis presents the typical characteristics of the electronic media: spontaneity of sound and image; percussive and repetitive projection of the same; the spoiling of the illusion and interruption of the dramatic sequence by, let us say, commercials.

⁸ *Dhiagbonios*, Second Series, 10 (1967), pp. 118–119.

⁹ In Jane Rye, *Futurism* (London: "Studio Vista," 1972), p. 23.

The equivalent in Pentzikis of this latter device is not so much his occasional reference to real commercials which have intrigued or amused him, but his frequent "advertising" of his faith in incantations and religious formulas. These elements project something magical in their repetition. The aim of this sort of memorialization of reality is to achieve a new unity and a feeling of total relatedness which the electronic media pursue.

Comparisons cannot be pressed too much. Yet particular works by Pentzikis can be juxtaposed with particular works of the modern stage or cinema, like *Einstein on the Beach* (an "opera in four acts" by Robert Wilson and Philip Glass) and the film on the expressionist painter Edvard Munch by British filmmaker Peter Watkins. The former opens and closes with two so-called "knee plays," three more of which link the acts of the opera together. In these "plays" two actors repeat constantly certain phrases and gestures to the accompaniment of a droning electronic organ. There is no apparent coherence in the content of the opera, no discernible plot or action. The sets and the music are equally baffling, so much so that some critic likened the whole thing to an invitation for dinner where the china, the silverware, and the flowers briefly hide from the guests the fact that they were to bring their own food.¹⁰ This criticism resembles similar criticisms levelled at Pentzikis, whose symmetries of divisions and subdivisions in his works are also perplexing. "Patterns we deny, and that is part of a pattern," the authors of that opera might say together with G. Bowering, author of the line quoted.¹¹ Pentzikis would endorse the statement, but boldly add: "The pattern of God."

Without his faith Pentzikis might have been like the moody artist Edvard Munch, whose famous painting *The Shriek* matches some of the desperate passages of *Andbreas Dhimakoudhis*. In the Watkins film, Munch slashes and gouges at his canvas the way Pentzikis does at times with his paper. The actors look into the camera as the Pentzikis characters often turn around — so he wishes them to do — and spoil the illusion of distance and the feeling of security

¹⁰ F. J. Spieler, "Adrift among Images" (a review of *Einstein on the Beach*), *Harpers* (March 1977), p. 112.

¹¹ G. Bowering, in *Fifteen Canadian Poets*, eds. G. Geddes and Ph. Bruce (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 226 (poem "Circus Maximus").

which distance can breed. Watkins wants to involve his audience and Pentzikis his readers. The movie takes the viewer to many places; the true setting, however, seems to be inside the artist's head. The meticulous dissection of the creative process in the movie parallels the attempts of Pentzikis, in the *Architecture of the Scattered Life* and elsewhere, to perform surgery on his own subconscious.

6. *Style as Play*

Play comes naturally to a child, but a playful adult is often so with a vengeance. Pentzikis will often trivialize life in order to ward off the demons of self-righteousness and false pride, his own and those of others. The more he ponders his existence, the more mysterious and baffling it seems, and play is a kind of response to unanswerable questions. During a visit he made in 1940 to some chapels in the Macedonian city of Kastoria, he let himself become a child again on meeting a group of real children that wondered about his identity and whether he was a Greek or a foreigner. He asked them for a ladder with the thought that, if he managed to climb it and have a look at the surroundings from on high, God might help him solve his problems! The children brought the ladder, but he gave up climbing it at the second step for reasons which he does not specify. Then the children told him about their school life and Pentzikis bought bread and halvah for them. They all stepped barefoot into the river nearby. Shortly after, some of the children accepted their new friend's proposition to carry water to a chapel and wash off the dirt from the (presumably glass-cased) icons. He was finally called by the children *trelakias* (crazy), which he did not mind (*Homilies*, pp. 157-160).

The playfulness of Pentzikis can be also seen as a Christian euphoria which springs from his conviction that beyond good and evil all things find their harmony in Christ. For it was he who summoned the children to himself and blessed those who were prepared to be like children. Pentzikis has seemed to many to display signs of arrested childhood. Yet he has continued to act like a child over the years, and the image of a child in play would be his favorite one.

The playful attitude of Pentzikis informs his writings with the use

of puns. Watson notices that puns are also found in *Synaxaristis*, especially in the epigrams of the saints of the day.¹² These innocent games with words relieve the gravity of whatever is discussed. They also serve a higher purpose, as they associate magically among themselves things and ideas which are not interconnected on first view.

The idea that Christianity need not be gloomy is suggested to Pentzikis by the scene of the dancing faithful in a mural from the monastery of Ghrighorios in Athos.¹³ A certain abbot's name, Ghelassios (The laughing one) provokes the same reaction (*Knowledge of Things*, revised edition, p. 155). The word for a writer of prose in Greek is *pezographos*, in which *pezo* indicates "prose" and *graphos* "writer". Divided differently, *pe-zographos*, the word suggests "child" in *pe* and "painter" in *zographos* (*Homilies*, p. 206). For the reader of Pentzikis, the pun may also signify an essential feature in this writer's personality, the writer of prose containing the innocent or primitive painter.

Filing Cabinet is particularly rich in puns and word-plays. An apartment house, *polykatikia*, is deliberately misspelled *poulikatikia*, to suggest a set of pigeon holes (*pouli* means "bird"). Elsewhere in the same work an apocryphal story about a Thessalonian to whom they serve milk at Ghalaxidhi, a town in Southern Greece, explains the etymology of the town's name: *ghala* (milk) and *xidhi* (vinegar). Further, the word *ghalaxias* is said to mean choice-milk (*axia* means "choice", "value"), while the Latin word *vates* (seer, poet) is jokingly associated with Greek *vates* (paddings).¹⁴

7. *The Game of Numbers*

At the bottom of all play is magic, and Pentzikis' trust in magic manifests itself mostly in his fascination with and symbolic use of numbers.

The narrator of *Retinue* is led to the game of numbers through deprivation:

¹² In "A Thessalonian — N. G. Pentzikis." (See chapter 1, n. 2).

¹³ Cf. chapter 4, p. 69.

¹⁴ *Filing Cabinet*, pp. 267, 145–148, and 330, and *Proceedings of the Panhellenic Congress of Writers*, p. 64.

He realizes that all possibilities and transformations depend on numbers. It is a question of mathematics since he has over-spent himself, or his money. By spending you learn the numbers: one, two, three, to nine. While zero, indispensable to the logistical completion of the decimal system, lies in the bottom from where you pull it after you reach extreme poverty. In other words, poverty is like a dive into the sea; you reach the bottom and catch sand. (p. 44)

Here zero is compared to sand. Elsewhere, it symbolizes the intangible yet very real element of the wind.¹⁵ By analogy, any letter of the alphabet is a source of countless possibilities. Each letter is the initial of numerous names. Names may be transformed into numbers and vice-versa. A telephone number corresponds to someone dear to us, and his or her name may be represented also by another set of digits. It depends on the value which we assign to each letter of the name.¹⁶

The original source of the mysticism of numbers is Pythagoras, who is alleged to have said that number is the wisest thing in the world.¹⁷ Numerology or number mysticism was central in the Pythagorean system, a mixture of cosmology, philosophy, and religion. Other Greek philosophers, like Anaximander, had tried to explain the earth-sun and earth-moon relationship in terms of numbers and mathematical symmetry. But Pythagoras went so far as to claim that the universe could not only be expressed in terms of numbers, but was itself number.¹⁸ His theory, which also spoke of the limited/unlimited-odd/even balance of the One, source of everything, was criticized by Aristotle.¹⁹ Yet it held a fascination for thoughtful men through the centuries and passed on to the Christian writers by way of Neoplatonism. Pentzikis thus drew his letters-and-numbers method from *Synaxaristis* and the Byzantines,

¹⁵ Chapter 4, p. 70.

¹⁶ Cf. chapter 4, p. 74.

¹⁷ The statement has been also attributed to Hippasos. See Aug. Nauck, ed., *Iamblich. De Vita Pythagorica Liber* (Amsterdam: Hakkert, 1965), p. 60.

¹⁸ Similarly. Pentzikis stresses that the equation, 0 (representing the element of the wind) + 1 (representing the individual) = 10, is not a simple metaphor but a "solid metaphysical phenomenon."

¹⁹ J. A. Philip, *Pythagoras and Early Pythagoreanism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1966), p. 79.

rather than from the early sources. By adopting this method "it is as though Pentzikis wants to counter God's own cryptography in nature with one of his own," remarked Kimon Friar in his *Modern Greek Poetry* (p. 110). The method with numbers releases and at the same time directs Pentzikis' imagination.

Envelope number four of Cabinet Six (for June) in *Filing Cabinet* includes among other things, a study of the first nine numbers, in which symbolism runs rampant. One is cited as the final remnant of phenomena, when these are studied in the full oblivion of their external form: the result of uniting the void with love. Love is Christ, who wedded heaven with the underworld after he released the dead from their bondage. One is death restored to life after receiving the gift of love. Two may be identified with a cross. In the heart's depth this cross is the result of a union of two straight lines of different origin. Without the "on earth as it is in heaven" the cross remains unfulfilled (pp. 109–110).

Anna of *Filing Cabinet* amuses herself and at the same time puts to good profit the time which she spends waiting for the return of Antonis. She does this by knitting a sweater for him on the letters-and-numbers method:

She determined the knots in her knitting by numerically transforming the names of the Saints honored within the second half of March. Tens of stitches that crossed one another shaped heavenly figures in the garment which was going to be worn one day by her beloved. Twenty-eight stitches commemorated Saint Anna, who was burned to death on the 26th of March, one in a group of twenty-six martyrs to die the same way. She was the first Anna to start knitting. Then came Anna mother of joy [the mother of the Virgin], who held inside her the uncontainable light; then Anna herself who had tears in her eyes as she felt that her name matched numerically the word love [Greek *agbapi*] on the knitting which her man was to wear. (pp. 235–236)

In his turn, Antonis, who is reported to be an accountant abandoned by his wife, follows the letters-and-numbers method in turning the word *efthyia* (happiness) into a numerical sum of 96. "He then got into the habit of summing up the various totals of his calculations by correcting those that did not end up in the above

number, symbolic of happiness. The result was that he lost his job after losing his wife." (p. 113)²⁰ Here Pentzikis seems to smile at the game with numbers, as he also does when he relates the story of a grandmother playing backgammon with her grandson. When she loses, she has to surrender to her young playmate as many spoonfuls of sweet confection as the number of his ancestors counting in generations from the birth of Christ (*The Novel of Mrs. Ersi*, pp. 172–173). The smiles are also part of the style as play.

8. *The Poetic Impulse*

The tortuous as well as the playful moods in Pentzikis are two extremes. They are the obverse and the reverse of his *askissi* (practicing of the monk's life), of his self-mortification and humility. In between these two extremes, however, we find another, more poetic Pentzikis, the writer of passages like the following, from *Notes of One Hundred Days*, where the shell of thought seems to enclose most fittingly the stirrings of the heart:

The lamp went off and its glass broke into one thousand pieces. But there emerged a new sun from the Holy Relics, lighting on the daily orderly life of the faithful in their slavery. It was as though he could make out that light from afar, he who was but a human garbage-dump, when he opened the door and went out into the streets, walking towards one man or another as if they were mystical receivers of *light*. His lips desired to kiss these people, were burning with desire, and that fire of desire allowed him more and more to appropriate the light to a degree that in the depths of the sea the Cucumaria²¹ overcame its envy for the other sea creatures that have a lamp. For she felt that she also had her own cool light, her own lamp of unspent *light*. (pp. 55–56)

A comparable sense of balance between the tangible and the mystical is evident in many passages of *The Novel of Mrs. Ersi*. For

²⁰ Pentzikis himself also confesses to have made arbitrary calculations in order to match his words with his numbers in the essay "Mystikistikes Apopsis pano stin Tihopiia ton Eklission tis Artas" ("Mystical views on the wall — construction of the churches of arta"), in the revised edition of *Andhreas Dhimakoudhis*, pp. 248–265.

²¹ *Cucumaria Planci*, a spineless creature of the family of echinoderms which includes also the sea-urchin.

example, in the episode that describes the contemplation by Mrs. Ersi of a painting, a still life which shows the interior of a bakery:

"Let him rejoice seeing the beauty and splendor of the hall."
The line from a Christian epigram of the Palatine Anthology could describe the impression of Mrs. Ersi, when she entered the bakery and the home attached to it. Everything was clean and orderly in there, as one advanced from the modest and small entrance of the front to the adjoining rooms, where shone, in a well-selected place, the icons with the lighted lamp before them. Everything in there imposed itself on the viewer, not by its material aspects but because he saw it transfigured, domesticated, in order to be useful as a sheath, as a place that could contain man. You could not think of that space without its human dweller nor could he exist outside it. The calm and order generated from that relationship was suggestive somehow of death. But at the same time you associated that impression with paradise. What else could a paradise be, deeper in, than a living death? Ceasing to worry, ceasing to think, without at the same time ceasing to feel the world, your inner rhythm synchronized perfectly with the moment, the general rhythm of life. You feel this as something incomparably richer than a sea bath in which your body is assimilated to the sea. (p. 83)

In the first of the above two passages one can detect lingering traces of both the tortuous and the playful elements in the style of Pentzikis. The man, whose reactions the passage describes, is called a human garbage-dump, while the personified sea creature at the end strikes a funny note. On the whole, however, both passages evoke a similar kind of serenity and confidence born by what has been called "the poetic impulse" in Pentzikis; that is, his instinct to transfigure his sensual or visual experiences by an infusion of imagination. And this works no less in his prose than in his poetry.

The mark that distinguishes artists from metaphysicians and theoretical philosophers is that the former metaphorize concrete or tangible reality without losing this same reality from sight. This explains also Pentzikis' unequivocal rejection of the iconoclasts of Byzantium who ruined many icons with the erroneous purpose of purifying faith. Pentzikis has many a harsh word for them, as his whole poetic self revolts at abstract and cold thought. Likewise, he

admires the monks for their self-imposed deprivations, but he feels much closer to them when he catches them being human. He is touched when a monk seems to yield to the temptations of the senses, be it the distraction of his ear by the chirping of birds or the overembellishing of his monastery church. Pentzikis wants spirituality to stay rooted in the world of the senses, the world of poetry.

9. *The Strength of Metaphor*

The capacity of Pentzikis to metaphorize may be illustrated by the following examples, which must be added to the other instances of felicitous metaphors and similes already seen.

He sees the ivy leaves shaking under the autumn rain like a sobbing maiden who does not know the world, while the successive raindrops on the dried leaves sound like drums that announce a death sentence. Another simile is more homely: a man yawns on a bus, and the hand which he places before his mouth looks like the cotton stuffing of an old doll. Even more homely, not to say bizarre, is the image of some Christian martyrs who trust to the eternal life and urge their executioners to fry them from both sides the way one does with meatballs (*Retinue*, pp. 78, 96).

Antonis of *Filing Cabinet* is sad; he feels incapable of uniting with his beloved: "The love arrows of women, he feels, have turned him into a sieve full of holes, similar to the perforated jar of the Danaids that could hold no water. Seeking solace in the church, he lights a candle in veneration of the Christian martyr Voussiris who, pierced with shuttles by women, was woven into a new fabric to the glory of God (*ibid.*, 293). A similar image is that of the little boy who pulls the hair of his girlfriend as Alexander the Great, impatient for an oracle, did with Pythia, the priestess of Delphi who was not in the mood for prophesying.

In *The Novel of Mrs. Ersi* Pentzikis asserts quite aptly that hate does not exist as a separate entity in the world, but rather is a simple transformation of love which has lost its head and drags itself blindly like a headless serpent. In "I Erotiidha" (The daughter of Eros) the middle notched rail of a funicular train is likened to a shark's teeth, while the chirping of a cicada that invades the train sounds as if "it interprets the hieroglyphics of all the folds in the

outer skin of the earth" (Revised edition of *Architecture of the Scattered Life*, p. 271). Another imaginative simile, however, is checked in its course like a paper kite flying too high: "I am carried away and it is a ship's sight that cleanses me, taking away all dirt. I am but a white scarf in the wind. I may rise high, become a seagull. But I am afraid of the barking dog" (*The Novel of Mrs. Ersi*, pp. 17-18). A spell of self-consciousness and a touch of humility!

10. *An Interview*

In the summer of 1978, I was granted an interview with Pentzikis. The discussion touched mainly on the Byzantine world and Pentzikis' Byzantine sources. Pentzikis as a conversationalist matches the writer and the artist. His randomness of thought goes hand-in-hand with his flashes of emotion and sharp aphorisms. The self-consciousness and slight hesitation of the first few minutes — particularly before a tape-recorder — soon go away. Pentzikis is absorbed by the subject which he discusses; he gesticulates or raises and at times slows down his voice to emphasize a point. His tone is always lively, tender, and pious in the narration of some religious story, rapturous in the description of some miracle or of some aspect of his dear "concrete" reality, sarcastic in reference to the enlightened stupid.

Answering a question on the origins of *Synaxaristis*, Pentzikis adds a colorful detail:

P. You must keep in mind this. The martyrdoms of Christians were attended by many people and short-hand writers noted all that took place. In fact, we know the name of one of those short-hands.

T. Interesting! I was not aware of this.

P. Yes, indeed. Just as it happens today, when you come to me and ask: "What are your impressions of . . .". It is so [that is, through accounts which witnesses of Christian martyrdoms have left] that we know that the martyrs suffered a little at first, but then they ceased suffering. They lost the sense of their own bodies and thought only of the others. You should also know that the martyrdoms of saints differed, depending on whether they occurred in the West or, let us say, in Persia, whether they were in Greece, in

Egypt, or in Syria. The Greek martyrdoms are comparatively mild; as for those in Persia, you cannot stand them. Terrible! On the 29th of September the Church honors the memory of the royal prince and holy martyr Ghovdhela. Well, Ghovdhela experienced great pain at first, for they pierced his head and inserted spikes into his ears, but then he lost the sense of pain and kept comforting others. This is a characteristic point.

Immediately after this comment, Pentzikis amplifies on the point made earlier about the original *Synaxaristis* being a compilation of material written or orally transmitted from the previous centuries:

P. Just as we say that it is impossible for Homer alone to have composed [his epics] but that he rather copied other texts . . . those who copy other texts must, through faith, submit to becoming beggars, blind, stupid. . . . You see, that is why tradition reports that Homer was born in seven cities. The Neoplatonic philosophers, who try to reach back to the mythical roots of man, explain all this very nicely.

In his reference to Homer, Pentzikis pays no tribute to the talent of the individual poet who has given to his epics an unequalled unity and starkness of vision. This is understandable since Pentzikis spurns literature as literature. Yet he is in general agreement with much of modern scholarship on the poetry of Homer, thought to be a true mirror of the orally transmitted epic songs of the archaic Greek ages, with its formulaic character and standard heroic motifs. Pentzikis is interested in the Homer who "copies," who tries to treasure in his epics the oral tradition of poetry and, more broadly, the reality of the world, and who is thus "compelled," as Pentzikis says later, "to write the catalogue of ships."²²

Pentzikis goes further when he mentions, with obvious approval, the Neoplatonic metaphysical interpretation of the claim of seven different cities in antiquity to have given birth to such a great poet as Homer. The rationalist will dismiss the claim of those seven

²² Homer provides his catalogue of Greek cities that sent ships in the expedition against Troy in *Iliad* 2, pp. 494–709. This is a passage in which Homer was "called upon to organize highly heterogeneous material without the support of plot or action," as Barry B. Powell observes in his "Word Patterns in the Catalogue of Ships (B 494–709): A Structural Analysis of Homeric Language," in *Hermes* 106, no. 2 (1978), p. 255. Most readers of Homer would find this particular passage of the *Iliad* valuable from a historical and antiquarian point of view, but not poetic enough.

cities (of which Chios and Smyrna were the strongest contestants) as impossible. Pentzikis, however, sees in the claim a reflection of the universality of Homer, of his submission to be everybody and copy the world as he had found it.

Copying, then, is defined a little more accurately, so that we come to realize that Pentzikis does not claim for everyone the right to steal literary material and use it for gain.

P. The greatest originality of the intellectual man is copying, and in a lecture which I had planned about Papadhiamantis²³ . . . I stressed that he is a first-class writer, because he is like Klee in painting, who adopted the copying memory [technique].²⁴ What is the copying memory? It is to have before you a text like a matrix, into which you will pour your own stuff. . . . Copying is a general phenomenon in Byzantium and later the tradition [concerning *Synaxaristis*] is continued by Nikodhimos, who adds his own commentary and says, for example: "He [that is, the earlier compiler] incorrectly includes those saints here, as he has referred to them and their epigrams also on that other date." You see, he checks the text for errors. Well, apart from that, Saint Nikodhimos writes a lot himself and inserts footnotes, drawing from other books, beautiful things. . . . Here, in Nikodhimos, we have all the Saints. The majority of Saints are anonymous. For example, there are entries that mention 147 or 7,000 or 20,000 martyrs. . . . These are anonymous but numerically known Saints. We find the citation [of the name of a Saint] and "those with him," that is, his students or people who simply shared his martyrdom. . . . Then, sometimes, we do not know the name, because it was the executioner who became a convert, after he saw the miracles performed by the Christians under torture, and who was executed on the spot.

T. Nikodhimos, has he . . .

P. Saint Nikodhimos . . .

T. Pardon me. Has Saint Nikodhimos dealt also with the new Saints?

P. Certainly. This he does in his *New Martyrology*. But there he

²³ See chapter 6, section 2.

²⁴ Cf. Paul Klee, *The Inward Vision. Watercolors-Drawings-Writings*. Trans. N. Guterman. (New York: Abrams, 1958), where Klee explains in short pithy aphorisms his creative philosophy.

often mentions the name of the person who wrote this "Life" or that "Life." We find there many Thessalonian Saints. My book *Notes of One Hundred Days* — you have it — is based on the *New Martyrology*. . . . On its cover I calculate what I saw as a man of the world and what I saw reflected in the *New Martyrology*. . . .²⁵

T. Is there a continuous process of canonization of saints?

P. Yes. . . . This is what convinces us today when we are all unbelievers; it is those neo-martyrs that convince us. Most beautiful is the story of a young man of about twenty, who went with his father from Chios to Psara²⁶ to carve the wooden iconostasis of the Church of Saint Nicholas — he was in other words a *taliadhouros*.²⁷ Well, when they finished their work, the boy said "Father, will you let me go?" A boat was passing by Psara on its way to Cavala. At Cavala . . . have you been to Cavala?

T. Yes, I have.

P. Have you seen . . . beyond the city center the promontory of the All Holy Virgin? There are some lush gardens. It seems that the lad went there and stole some fruit from a Turkish garden. You see, he was an ordinary person like you and me. All Saints are like that. Well, he was caught and the Turkish judge told him that he had a choice of either becoming a Moslem or dying. He chose to become a Moslem, but in forty days he returned and was martyred willingly. . . . Or take the "Life" of the martyr John from Thessaloniki, whose real name was Nanos, a shortened form of Ioannis [John]. He went with his father to Smyrna to earn some money. He [the father] was a trader in shoes, and a Turk ordered some shoes, which the man sent with his son, for whose return he waited in vain. For forty days the young man was a Turk [that is, a convert to the Moslem religion]. And suddenly he came back to die a martyr. He understood that he belonged elsewhere. All of us say: "Oh, how beautiful the world is. This is the world which we have . . . why should I take the trouble?" Yet, what happens in the soul . . .

The discussion, then, touches on how Pentzikis deals with the religious texts and how he draws inspiration from them:

²⁵ Cf. chapter 3, p. 62.

²⁶ A small island of the Aegean, near the bigger island of Chios. Psara was laid waste after a Turkish invasion during the Greek War of Independence.

²⁷ "Sculptor." The word which Pentzikis uses is of Italian origin.

T. How do you go about reading *Synaxaristis*?

P. At first I perused it with a notebook by my side where I summarized what I read. Then, I wanted to see, to make other summaries, shorten the text and adapt it to today's way of thinking. Then, I made other summaries of the actions described. . . .

T. Do you check who is the Saint of the day, and do you consult to find out about his life?

P. Every day I read the summary, either the long summary or the summary of the actions. Or, again, another summary which is more literary [here Pentzikis laughed], in which I have made an effort to reflect today's spirit, and sometimes the summary that gives only the title and the epigram [of the Saint]. Some epigrams are real masterpieces. Well, the majority of my paintings are based on the summaries of the epigraphs and epigrams. . . .

T. Since 1967 you have read religious texts almost exclusively. Isn't it so?

P. Yes, I read *Synaxaristis* every day. I wake up. I say the Lord's prayer and then I read *Synaxaristis*.

T. But you do not avoid secular texts.

P. On the contrary. But I read those at other hours. You see, if I avoided the secular works, then I would become empty and the struggle would cease. A work is alive and offers living examples, because the living man fights with tradition . . . Well, I read these [the religious texts], but I also want to read other, secular texts, to see, to know, to be able to relate the two together, to struggle, to be defeated by the secular texts and be able to restore myself through the reading of the religious ones.

T. Do you think that the monks also should read secular texts?

P. No, because their salvation stems from the fact that they belong in another world. The Church and the monastery are another world. It cannot be done. If the monk starts reading secular works, how will he find the time to chant in the church or go to put flowers before the icon of the Saint whose memory is honored on a particular day? You know, they have to do this very often. . . . Then, how will they clean and prepare for cooking, let us say, *vlita* [a green, leafy vegetable] or artichokes, if they do not intone at the same time church melodies? . . . The deprivation of worldly things is their [the monks'] own source of struggle, while mine is

different. If I read only religious works, I would become some kind of theologizing pedant. Instead, I keep myself in life and fight, while the monk will go to clean the toilets [of his monastery]. . . . That is why the poems of Theodoros Stoudhitis are of immense importance . . . for those who are in charge of various tasks in a monastery.²⁸ The professor of Byzantine literature at the University of Thessaloniki before the war dealt with these poems in ten minutes . . . “prosaic stuff,” he said. You see, they do not understand one thing. That Homer is also prose and everything else is prose, when they show such a great rapport with the world. . . . The best part of Homer is the “catalogue of ships.”²⁹ Look, in your memory you confuse feelings with objects, but it is the objects that weigh most. If you can “freshen up” an inventory of items used, let us say, in the army . . . here I am referring to something that did occur. I had a friend who was killed at the battle of Crete. He told me once: “My dear Nikos, I can read and understand Elytis³⁰ and all the others, but I cannot understand you. Why don’t you write like the others? You know that I like you very much, I see and hear you and feel that you are an inspired person, but . . .” “Well, for me the best kind of poetry,” I said, “is this.” And I pointed to a list of clothing articles used in the army service — where he had been posted so that he could have a rest before returning to his unit. He was from Thessaloniki and I mention him in *Filing Cabinet*. He died during the war. Well, that list contained shoes, *tsarouhia*,³¹ army boots . . . such. “It is for these that we work, for these that we live and these which we invent,” I said; “if you can accept these as your own and develop a great love for life and for the world, you hardly need anything else.” Theodoros Stoudhitis praises [in his epigrams] the work which one does within the world of the world which is a monastery.

²⁸ Theodore, of the monastery of Studium in Constantinople, was active in the early ninth century. In his epigrams addressed to the humbler servants in a monastery, he wants to remind them of the equally humble occupations originally held by the Apostles.

²⁹ See n. 22 above.

³⁰ Odysseus Elytis is one of the best-known modern Greek poets and was the recipient of the 1979 Nobel Prize for Literature.

³¹ Greek country-style shoes, tasselled, now worn only for ceremonial purposes by the *erzones*, a special unit of the Greek army that guards the presidential palace and the tomb of the unknown soldier in Athens.

We should not hasten to infer a double standard in Pentzikis' candid confession of reading secular works in order to keep himself in life, while admiring the monks' way of life, which, however, he did not adopt for himself. He says that he must be seduced and defeated by the world in order to regain his spiritual sanity through the reading of religious works. But we must view these and other similar statements which he has made as the innocent rationalizations of someone who cannot resist living. Pentzikis belongs to life and the struggles which a life of action involves. "Fate will lead the man who follows it willingly, while it will drag by force the man who refuses," said Seneca.³² The lot of Pentzikis has not been the monastery, but a life of action. He has been intelligent and honest enough to acknowledge and pursue his lot willingly, while he keeps in sight that ideal "other" world of monks and anchorites. His fight with the world and in the world is his own *askissi*, his own practicing of the solitary life. Singlemindedly he has followed a path which promises no literary glories and very few material rewards.

Pentzikis' stress of the value of the mundane and the prosaic, elements which he finds in Homer as well as in the Byzantine Theodhoros Stoudhitis, springs from the same deep interest in the world of the senses and the life of action. The inspired bard Homer and the practical theologian Stoudhitis show a similar preoccupation with the realities of this world. Pentzikis seems to find a bridge between the supernatural and the natural in that preoccupation, as well as in the preparation of vegetables for cooking by a simple monk and in his cleaning of toilets. This makes us understand better Pentzikis' own praise of an inventory of military items. Prose is poetry and poetry is prose.

³² "Ducunt volentem fata, nolentem trahunt." *Epist. ad Lucilium* 107. 11.

CHAPTER 6

PENTZIKIS AND OTHERS

1. *The Ambiguity of Comparisons*

The content and scope of Pentzikis' work are so vast that we can compare him to a host of writers, old and new, from the chroniclers and moralists of past centuries to the exponents of the "new novel," sophisticated reporters of actuality, writers of travel books, and anthropologists. Rousseau's and Thoreau's love of nature, Poe's romantic and occult inclinations, the stress on memory and the all-inclusive vision of life by Proust and Gide, are only some of the links of Pentzikis with other non-Greek writers. Of these writers the most frequently mentioned in the books of Pentzikis seems to be Joyce. The Irish pioneer of the modern novel lends Pentzikis also specific literary motifs from his *Ulysses*,¹ the work which is chiefly in the mind of Pentzikis when he refers to Joyce.

One should be careful, however, not to label Pentzikis a Greek Joyce, for in terms of style at least there is a great difference between the two. In spite of his modernity, Joyce presents in *Ulysses*, as has been noted in Kimon Friar's discussion of Pentzikis' poetry, "an architectural framework of myth, consistent symbolism, reference, and parallelism that distinguish *Ulysses* and give it homogeneity" (*Modern Greek Poetry*, p. 109). This of course one cannot say about the books of Pentzikis, vast and varied canvases of learning of all shades, unless one isolates his recurrent Christian themes and symbols and see them as the limbs of a skeleton or parts of a solid framework which give it homogeneity.

¹ Apart from the solitary-walk-on-the-beach motif, which we find in both Joyce's *Ulysses* and in several places in Pentzikis — the motif derives originally from Homer — Watson notes, in his essay on Pentzikis (see chapter 1, n. 2), the scene in *The Novel of Mrs. Ersi* (p. 108), in which the narrator explores the more private parts of Ersi's body by looking through her robe as she sits on the bow of a ship. There is a similar scene in *Ulysses*.

Pentzikis considers Joyce to be the writer most representative of our times because he suggested the dissolution of the individual man and the collapse of the Renaissance and post-Renaissance idea of the human species as the center of the world. An analogue of this idea in pre-Christian times is found in the famous lines from the *Antigone* of Sophocles: "many are the wonders of this world but none is greater than man himself." Joyce as well as other modern writers like Kafka, Sartre, and Camus have questioned the classical definition of an individual, and most of their characters are people uncertain of themselves, lost in a penumbra of guilt and existential anxiety. This is exactly the starting point of most works of Pentzikis.

Writers like Faulkner and the French exponents of the *anti-roman* or *nouveau roman* fuse the characters of their stories with the form of these same stories. They favor images that dehumanize their subjects, for they often compare people to animals and inanimate objects. Similarly, Pentzikis sees writing as a process which must render the whole person, or, at least, all those physical and moral activities that characterize, together with his environment, what we call a human being. We can hardly say that Pentzikis copied any of these writers, many of whom have in fact published later than he. It is also a mere coincidence that the "new novel's" chief theoretician, Robbe-Grillet, sounds like Pentzikis when he points out the difficulty of writing today a *complete* novel like Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, with identifiable characters, plots, and settings; or when he defends the choppy style of contemporary writers and their use of the present tense as a reaction to the linear concept of time and the cause-and-effect linking devices of which older writers made so much use.

Pentzikis does not copy but simply falls in with these modern writers in their common response to the realities of our time, technological and otherwise, and in their use of intertextual structures. Pentzikis would have accordingly endorsed Dos Passos' words: "In relation to style and methods of writing, I hardly think of the past in chronological order. Once on the library shelf Juvenal and Dreiser are equally 'usable'."² Everything can be blended with

² A. Hook, ed., *Dos Passos. A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1974), p. 13.

the present, a present "immeasurably amplified" in the words of Natalie Sarraute, a time of perpetual actuality which, according to Robbe-Grillet "continuously invents itself . . . repeats itself, doubles itself, transforms itself, belies itself."³

The similarities between the above non-Greek writers and Pentzikis are, however, too general for one to compare Pentzikis in any detail with any one of them. But an exception could be made with Jorge Luis Borges. The Argentinian luminary is certainly a very different kind of writer from the northern Greek who is little known outside his own country. Pentzikis is the artist as reporter who registers and recycles whatever comes his way. Borges is, instead, the writer as alchemist, meticulous in his style. In his famous *Ficciones*, at least, he manages to vanish completely behind his writing. Yet, there are some striking affinities between Borges and Pentzikis.⁴ Both were born in well-to-do and educated families and both are conservative in politics because they share an inner skepticism about the possibility of human betterment through social change. Most characteristically, both have identified themselves with their respective native cities. The long, informative walks which Borges has taken around Buenos Aires with visiting friends are like the guided tours which Pentzikis offers his own friends in and around Thessaloniki. Jacques Lacarrière, who calls Pentzikis the *genius loci*, the protective spirit of Thessaloniki, says that he owes his best times in that city to him. One could compare this with the statement by another Frenchman, Drieu La Rochelle, that Borges was worth a trip to Argentina.⁵

More significantly, both Borges and Pentzikis were blamed by their respective critics for their manners of writing, which, though essentially different, have seemed equally evasive and operative in a purely verbal dimension. They are considered verbal gymnasts, along with writers like Joyce, Kafka and Beckett, whose work is

³ Natalie Sarraute, *L'Ère du soupçon* (Paris: Gallimard, 1956), p. 2; Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Pour un nouveau roman* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), p. 168.

⁴ Borges has been compared with another Greek writer, Cavafy, by Willis Barnstone in "Real and Imaginary History in Borges and Cavafy," *Comparative Literature* 29, no. 1 (Winter 1977), pp. 54-73.

⁵ J. Lacarrière, *L'Été grec*, p. 340. The statement by Drieu La Rochelle, "Borges vaut le voyage," is quoted in G. Sucre, *Jorge-Luis Borges*. Trans. Pierre de Place. (Paris: Seghers, 1971), p. 12.

built solely on the vertiginal theme of its non-existence. The last criticism echoes a view of Octavio Paz on Borges in connection with the other named writers, but can be applied to Pentzikis as well. Other critical statements on Borges also appear to fit Pentzikis perfectly. The latter tends to mortify his mind and reassert misery and helplessness as necessary in the overall plan of creation. Thus he is like Borges, "a man who clings to his unbelief in the belief that only in unbelief can certainty be found."⁶ Borges himself has said that a writer must be somewhat innocent and that creation must be realized as though in a dream.⁷ Pentzikis would have said the same. But he would add at the same time a metaphysical or theological side to the dream which the non-believer Borges does not seem to imply.

2. *Relationship with Other Greek Writers*

The connections of Pentzikis with other Greek writers are much deeper and more pervasive than his links with non-Greeks. It is indeed the writers of his land with whom Pentzikis identifies best. Ancient annalists, antiquarians, and moralists like Plutarch are very much in the literary baggage of Pentzikis. This baggage, however, includes above all the Byzantine theologians, historians, and chroniclers of events great and small in medieval times, the Golden Age of faith.

Many modern Greek writers are also mentioned by Pentzikis in passing or lend him characteristic passages, motifs, images, and support of various kinds. These are writers whom he often commends, as for example Alexandros Papadhiamentis, the so-called Saint of Greek Letters. Pentzikis likes Papadhiamentis for the innocent and humble nature of his characters and the simple unalloyed faith which inspires his many short stories and novellas. What particularly attracts Pentzikis to that, as well as other Greek writers like Andreas Karkavitsas and Yannis Vlahoyannis, is their insular attitude toward ideological and literary influences from the West, coupled with a stress on national Greek traditions. They have

⁶ J. M. Cohen, *Jorge Luis Borges* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1973), p. 1.

⁷ Quoted in Sucre, *Jorge-Luis Borges*, p. 15.

showed him, as Pentzikis asserts, that the traditional ways of life and thought are still possible and productive.

Pentzikis also shares certain attitudes with some of his contemporaries among Thessalonian writers. He is first of all linked with those writers of prose, like Stelios Xefloudhas, Alkis Yannopoulos, and Yorghos Dhelios, and poets, like Yorghos Themelis and Yorghos Vafopoulos, who, in the thirties, gave the first impetus to the creation of a more or less distinctive Thessalonian literature.⁸

A group of intellectuals gathered around the journal *Makedhonikes Imeres*, first published in 1932.⁹ In addition to the already mentioned Xefloudhas, whom critics generally think to be the first ever to write "interior monologue" in Greece, the group included the student and later teacher of philosophy Vassilis Tataakis and the critic Petros Spandhonidhis. The manifesto of the new journal was drafted by Spandhonidhis, who pointed out the absence, until that time, of any serious literary tradition in Thessaloniki and promised the birth of one through the publication of the journal. New talents would be discovered and encouraged and the new literary trends of Europe would be transplanted and tried in Thessaloniki.

Pentzikis found himself in a somewhat ambiguous position with regard to the group of *Makedhonikes Imeres*. He shared with these writers a new consciousness, an inclination to explore the inner space of man. In his June 18, 1977, interview given to the Athens daily *Ta Nea*, Pentzikis said that introspection, in general, seemed to be habitual with Thessalonian writers, in contrast to the greater extroversion of the Athenian writers. Yet the former, again according to Pentzikis, felt no compelling need to go back to their Byzantine roots or even explore the origins of their European counterparts. It was he who started ruminating and "metabolizing," in his own peculiar ways, the mental and spiritual nourishment which he received from the world of tradition.

The more unorthodox treatment of literary form and the affirmation of his Byzantine roots brought Pentzikis into contact with Athenian writers like George Sarantaris, his senior by one year,

⁸ Cf. chapter 2, section 1.

⁹ *Makedhonikes Imeres* had been preceded, a decade earlier, by the publication of a more conservative journal, *Makedhonika Gbhammata* (Macedonian Letters), edited by the poet Vafopoulos.

who died in 1941. Sarantaris was one of the first to notice and write about Pentzikis. He showed, like him, impatience with literary form, used no punctuation in his poetry, and searched for essences. He also shared Pentzikis' faith in Greek Orthodoxy, but was an idealistic Christian whose masters were Kierkegaard and Berdiaeff.

Religious mysticism related Pentzikis also to two other Greek writers and artists, several years his seniors: Stratis Dhoukas, who is mainly known for his writing, and Photis Kontoghrou, better known for his Byzantine-style murals and portable icons. Dhoukas' few narratives are liked for their sincerity of feeling and a religious kind of anxiety. Kontoghrou fought frantically against Western influences. As a religious painter he exemplified Pentzikis' idea of meaningful "copying." He continued the Byzantine tradition of painting with complete and rigorous adherence to the rules of the genre. Yet there is a capital difference between him and Pentzikis with regard to the concept of meaningful "copying." For Kontoghrou, preserving the tradition of Byzantine iconography meant the faithful reproduction of finished icons, whereas Pentzikis wants memory to penetrate beneath the surface of the icon to the level of the fundamental impulses which generated the icon.

The Byzantine element, at least in diction, also appears in the work of Pentzikis' sister, the poet Zoe Karelli. Like her younger brother, Karelli is inclined to self-biting psychological analysis and mysticism, but is on the whole more rational. Much of her poetry ends on notes of doubt. The poet Vafopoulos also uses words from the church language, but is less effusive than Pentzikis. His self-scrutiny often yields to, or shields itself in self-irony.

A cosmopolitan and at the same time Thessalonian self-consciousness marks the work of several post-war writers like Tilemahos Alaveras, Yorghos Ioannou, Yorghos Kitsopoulos, the poets Klitos Kyrou and Panos Thassitis, the idiosyncratic Dinos Christianopoulos and Kostas Taktsis, Vassilis Vassilikos and Yorghos Himonas, Yorghos Stoyannidhis, Nikos Alexis Aslanoglou, and Sakis Papadimitriou. Most of these still remain, write, and publish in Thessaloniki. Of the others, Vassilikos has carried his restlessness around the world, while Ioannou, Taktsis, and Himonas are now based in Athens. The new element in these writers results from the impact on them of the Second World War and the

accelerated rhythm of postwar life. The inner conflicts of their fictional characters or masks — variations of a self-scrutinizing self — are less ambiguous than those described by the writers of the previous generation. They are also presented more realistically. New literary journals in the fifties, like *Nea Poria* (New course) and *Dhiaghonios*, which are still going, and the short-lived *Kritiki* (Criticism) and *Dhialoghos* (Dialogue) broadened the scope of Thessalonian creative writing and literary criticism.

None of the younger writers of Thessaloniki imitate the style of Pentzikis, which is after all too peculiar to be imitated with impunity. It is certain, however, that Pentzikis has influenced and inspired several of them in one way or another. The lonely young man who broods over the question of his identity and his rapport with his city — a figure that recurs in the works of Pentzikis and never vanishes completely — is also found in the prose of Yorghos Ioannou, Sakis Papadimitriou, and in the early works of Vassilikos. Thessaloniki operates as both a defining and a confining element of action. Both Vassilikos and Ioannou try to salvage the individuality of their heroes by darkening their environment. Yet this environment is never lost from sight completely. In *The Plant* by Vassilikos, the young character wants to create a world of his own in his room, away even from his friends and relatives. He brings in a pot with a leaf (we may recall Andhreas Dhimakoudhis treasuring a leaf in his wallet), that grows and spreads outwards, ultimately encroaching on the lives of the others, who attack and destroy it with axes.¹⁰

The figure of the alienated and self-conscious young man who takes refuge in his memories and fantasies persists also in Papadimitriou and Ioannou. On the other hand, the realism of Taktsis' *The Third Wedding* — a novella which is partly set in Thessaloniki and has had a *succès de scandale* due to its peppery style — reminds one of Pentzikis' *Knowledge of Things* and other works that describe the life of the poor Thessalonian folk. The problems of the Thessalonian plebs and its struggle for survival also figure in some more socially conscious works by Vassilikos.

None of these writers, however, has projected Pentzikis' feeling

¹⁰ Vassilikos' *The Plant* is part of a trilogy, *The Plant, The Well, The Angel*. Trans. Edmund and Mary Keeley (New York: Knopf, 1964).

of a historical and mythical Thessaloniki. They recollect or describe, impressionistically and expressionistically, the city of their childhood or its present life, while Pentzikis moves back and forth across the centuries and across the tangible and metaphysical realities of Thessaloniki.¹¹

3. *Pentzikis and his Critics*

Various named and unnamed critics and reviewers of Pentzikis were quoted or simply cited in the foregoing chapters. Here, an attempt will be made to complete the discussion of the impact that Pentzikis has made on his contemporary critics and theoreticians of literature and art. These last naturally mirror the impressions Pentzikis has made on the reading public.

The majority of Greek literary critics have either ignored Pentzikis or treated him with hostility and derision. This can be understood. His work is seemingly incoherent in both form and spirit, and the routine newspaper and journal critic is too indolent to treat it properly. He finds it difficult to place Pentzikis in a familiar context; therefore, he bypasses him or singles him out with disapproval as a model to be avoided. One unsympathetic critic, in fact, went so far as to assign his own views to Seferis in a review which he wrote on Seferis' *The Hours of "Mrs. Ersi"* by isolating and making a case of a few critical hints found in the book.¹²

Of those who have taken an interest in Pentzikis and showed sympathy for what he has been trying to realize, most limit themselves to restating with slight variations the staple information about his work: its originality, its obsession or identification with Thessaloniki, the peculiar brand of Christianity that inspires it; Pentzikis' learning and particular erudition in Byzantine literature

¹¹ The writers of Thessaloniki are discussed in some detail by A. Arghyriou, in "The Literary Life of Thessaloniki in the Last Thirty Years," *Epitheorissi Technis* (Review of the arts), 94-95 (October-November 1962), pp. 390-415; in the special issue of *Nea Estia* (see chapter 2, p. 13); by T. Alaveras in *Prose Writers of Thessaloniki* (Thessaloniki: Konstantinidhis, n.d.); by T. Kazantzis in "A Continuing Controversy: 'School of Thessaloniki,'" in the Athens daily *I Kathimerini* (December 8, 1977); and by Mario Vitti in his book *The Generation of the Thirties. Ideology and Form* (Athens: Ermis, 1977).

¹² A. Sahinis, in *Nea Poria*, 263-264 (January-February 1977), pp. 28-29.

and theology at a time when only professional scholars deal with these; finally, Pentzikis' eccentricity.

There are indeed a handful of critics or men of letters, apart from Seferis, who have made an effort to explore not only the surface, but also the inner regions of Pentzikis' works and chart its less obvious merits. Dinos Christianopoulos, Stratis Tsirkas, Takis Sinopoulos and Jacques Lacarrière have been already quoted or mentioned. Others who have placed Pentzikis more or less correctly within the spectrum of Thessalonian literature or modern Greek literature are Pentzikis' fellow-Thessalonian poets Yorghos Themelis and Takis Varvitsiotis and the critics Spandhonidhis, Alaveras, Pittas and Meraklis. To these may be added the names of Brother Vassilios (abbot of the Stavronikita monastery in Athos), the art critic Chryssanthos Christou, professor at the University of Thessaloniki, and Elias Petropoulos, author of an already cited pamphlet. In this pamphlet Petropoulos assesses Pentzikis as a writer and a painter through a close, Pentzikis-like, statistical consideration of his language and colors and themes in his painting.

A man who early took a lively interest in Pentzikis, wrote and lectured about him, and acted as patron for his work over the years is Professor George Savidis. "All men are or were at least born unique," Savidis has said in speaking about Pentzikis, "but most men spend their lives trying, consciously or unconsciously, to hide their uniqueness and become either 'like the others' or 'better than the others.' Instead, Pentzikis is one of the very few people who have devoted their lives to the effort of becoming more and more themselves, of gaining their souls."¹³ There is much truth in these remarks, although they disguise (unintentionally) the fact of Pentzikis' humility and denial of his own uniqueness. Pentzikis denies to the individual man the right to say "I" and feel comfortable about it.

The most concise critique in English of Pentzikis so far was contributed by Kimon Friar in his *Modern Greek Poetry*.¹⁴ Friar compares the prose of Pentzikis with that of Sir Thomas Browne and William Butler Yeats. The comparisons are a bit forced, as

¹³ In a review of Pentzikis' writing and painting, in *O Tahydhromos* (22 March 1958).

¹⁴ See chapter 3, n. 11.

inevitably would be any comparisons of Pentzikis with others. Friar also observes that the Christian faith of Pentzikis keeps him free from the tensions of existentialist doubt and of a split personality between the real and the unreal — a rather hurried observation, for not only are such anxieties very real in Pentzikis, but they also give his work its special dynamism. But the remarks which Friar offers on the style and writing methods of Pentzikis are quite apt, as, for instance, his statement that Pentzikis attains through his work “an ecstasy not of tension nor of harmony but of rhythmic repetition, as in the dervish dance of a million veils that embellish the body of non-existence.”

So far, the longest essay in Greek on Pentzikis, a forty-page typescript of a university term paper, is the already mentioned “A Thessalonian — N. G. Pentzikis” by Giles Watson.¹⁵ Though sketchy, this is a useful introduction of Pentzikis as the offspring of a particular, religious and literary environment. The goal of Watson, whose essay has been used here and there in this study, is to show the unity underscoring the personality and work of Pentzikis through an investigation of his topography, his Byzantine sources, and his interest in myth and folk traditions.

4. *Pentzikis as Memorializer of Literature*

Pentzikis emerges as a literary critic in the few independent essays or reviews which he has published on other writers and in the pronouncements on literature which we find in his works.

Hundreds of writers, Greek and non-Greek, old and new, parade through the books of Pentzikis, particularly those that appeared after *Knowledge of Things*. Frequently, Pentzikis provides only a simple citation of the writer's name or of a literary work or a brief description of its content or theme without any evaluative comment. Sometimes he quotes from literary works. These quotations may be exact or sometimes slightly inexact, since Pentzikis quotes largely from memory and is not above changing the word order of a quotation in order to match it, as he says, with the matter he is discussing. More rarely Pentzikis offers evaluative comments on the spirit or style of literary works.

¹⁵ See chapter 1, n. 2.

In the first chapter of Part Two of *The Novel of Mrs. Ersi*, for example, Pentzikis alludes to some eighteen literary authors, passages or works. These include authors and works from antiquity like Homer in the *Iliad*, and Porphyrios the Neoplatonist, Byzantine chroniclers like Michael Psellos and Theophanis, western European writers like Mallarmé and Joyce, and many modern Greek writers. Some of these, like Lorenzos Mavilis, Alexandhros Moraitidhis, Stratis Myrivilis, and Dionysios Solomos, are comparatively well known. Others, like Themis Potamianos, who wrote about fishing, or the poet Anthoula Stathopoulou,¹⁶ are somewhat obscure. In addition, Pentzikis alludes to two holy men, Saint Isidhoros Piloussiotis¹⁷ and Symeon the Young Theologian, and to the emperor Constantine Monomahos.

The ancients are mined for images like Achilles offering a lock of hair to the shade of Patroclus or for injunctions like Porphyrios' warning against the pleasures of the flesh. Pentzikis thinks that the account by Psellos of the life of Constantine Monomahos is lacking, since Psellos did not appreciate the emperor's trusting, basically childlike nature, nor the solemnity of his paternal office as Byzantine monarch. Psellos was unable to penetrate through the mass of contradictory, seemingly immature actions of Monomahos in order to describe "the unity of the paternal role." In a dream-passage, Pentzikis assumes the character of the emperor's buffoon and talks an exalted sort of gibberish, a mixture of rustic Greek and the language of the Karaghiozis shadow-puppet theater. The king and the hunchback buffoon manage to identify with each other by acknowledging man's essential helplessness and his need to rely on God.

The Europeans, Mallarmé and Joyce, are likened by Pentzikis to children. Mallarmé, despite his subtle games of description, despaired at the tyranny of fate and the inability of books to dispel his personal weariness. The "devilish Irish prose-writer" Joyce also manifested a playful nature that had once been repressed during the harsh years of his seminary education. "By shedding his indi-

¹⁶ First wife of the poet Yorghos Vafopoulos.

¹⁷ Isidore of Pelusium, who died about 450 A.D.; a monk and a theologian, admirer of Saint John Chrysostom, but enemy of several other high-churchmen of his time.

viduality," Pentzikis comments, "almost in the same way in which the ancient Egyptian embalmers emptied corpses, so as to salvage the likeness [of the human body], or dwelling of the *Ka*, Joyce arrives at guessing the meaning of true beauty — though he complains that he never had a chance to play — by recommending warmly the study of the Greeks, who, as is known, were always like playful children."

In modern Greek writers, Pentzikis alludes mainly to striking poetic images: Mavilis' image of dusk and a breeze blowing through the rose trees, Myrivilis'¹⁸ description of twilight at Perama, suburb of Piraeus, or Solomos' own descriptions of a breeze in his dramatic poem *Lambros* or in his lyrical poem "The Moon-clad Maiden".

On Symeon, Pentzikis observes that the saintly man was criticized for venerating the picture and memory of his spiritual mentor before this man had been formally consecrated as a saint by the Church. Yet Symeon, Pentzikis writes in his defense, "who had so much love in his heart that his disciples saw him with their own eyes levitating several meters above the ground as if he were a cloud of tears surely could not wait for special permission to express his adoration. He triumphed by becoming an icon himself."

This summary of Pentzikis' literary allusions in a single chapter of *The Novel of Mrs. Ersi* is typical of the author's style elsewhere. His method, which he compares to making *koureloudhes*,¹⁹ is to skip back and forth across the ages to various writers who either can illustrate a point in his argument or bear a close or even tenuous connection with his discussion. In the passages summarized above, Pentzikis treats the authors as casually as he does all other items in his memory, but here he seems to dwell on the Byzantine chronicler Psellos and his portrait of the emperor Constantine Monomachos. The juvenile tendencies of the emperor mirror the playful element in Pentzikis' own character.²⁰ Pentzikis reveals here also certain insights into the playful qualities of Mallarmé or of Joyce. In

¹⁸ One of the important modern Greek writers of fiction, whose principal novels are available in English translation.

¹⁹ *Koureloudhes* are coarse fabrics woven from rags and used as floor mats.

²⁰ Monomachos (one of the two Byzantine emperors whom Pentzikis likes most — the other is Leo the Sixth, or Leo the Wise of the late ninth century) is also featured in the narrative "Mia Ptissi" (A flight) in the revised edition of *Architecture of the Scattered Life*, pp. 238–240, and mentioned in many other places in Pentzikis' works.

the latter, Pentzikis notes elsewhere, playfulness was a mixed blessing because the serious purpose of his mature work sometimes exhausted itself in irony.

Many of Pentzikis' literary allusions group themselves around a dominant theme, namely, that writing is a form of play. The meaning of play is broadened to include all life under the watchful eye of God, and the new definition receives its mythical sanction in the author's dream about Constantine Monomahos. Pentzikis affirms the worth of that emperor's contradictory life by citing the chronicler Theophanis, who gave greater weight to the holiness of the king's office than to the vagaries of his character. In short, these passages suggest again that for Pentzikis literature, like life itself, is an act of grace rather than the result of conscious effort.

5. *Pentzikis as Critic of Literature*

Pentzikis' perceptiveness as a critic of other writers is remarkable and of the intuitive kind. Of his separate essays or reviews that fall into this category we shall investigate the three most important, which suggest also the deeper unity of Pentzikis' thought. The first two appeared in the same issue of *Koblias* and they are on Mallarmé and Themelis.²¹

The essay on Mallarmé starts with some general thoughts on myth, which are the most explicit on the value of myth that we know in Pentzikis. Mallarmé turned away from the positivist thought of his time and tried to resurrect myth, but his mythical domain starts and ends with his art. Mallarmé or poets like Mallarmé have no religion other than their art. Pentzikis, finds, however, in the creative fervor of these poets something similar to the religious fervor of the mystic: "the thorough interior examination of all folds and creases of the individual soul, which leads to purity, is not that much removed from the visions of the mystics; the exaltation of the mind, the greater cerebrality, courts madness."

The mythical *persona* of Mallarmé, *Igitur* ("therefore" in Latin), may be compared to Homer's *Outis* (No Man), *persona* of Odys-

²¹ "Ghia ton Mallarmé" (On Mallarmé) and "O Themelis ke ta Shimata" (Themelis and the forms), in *Koblias* (June 1947), pp. 84-86 and 94, and 94-96 respectively.

seus. Pentzikis explains all those elements which he finds in *Igitur* and continues with a placement of the French poet vis-à-vis other writers. Like Baudelaire, Mallarmé learned much from Edgar Allan Poe, who defined poetry as "the rhythmical creation of beauty" and found the first element of poetry in "the thirst for supernal beauty." Mallarmé neither yields to a Joycean type of irony nor to an aristocratic attitude about art (commonly expressed in the "art for art's sake" doctrine) and the concept of the ivory tower.

Mallarmé may have originally attracted Pentzikis because of the latter's secret wish to become a writer like Mallarmé and because of his admiration for French literature. The high standards of that literature, as Pentzikis observes, made the existence of a writer like Mallarmé possible whereas the less developed state of Irish letters made it impossible for someone like Joyce to stay in his home country. Hence, Joyce's self-protective irony in *Ulysses*. Mallarmé did not need that. Yet Mallarmé also remained an individual, and for Pentzikis no individual, however refined, can define or represent a whole society. Pentzikis has translated and made *Igitur* his own in order to surpass its spirit and overcome its charm.

A Thessalonian by naturalization if not birth, Yorghos Themelis grew, intellectually, in parallel with Pentzikis and faced the same existential questions. He eventually became known as an educator and critic of literature as well as a neo-symbolist poet of some distinction.

In his review of Themelis, Pentzikis tries to identify himself with Themelis and see the world with his eyes by first paraphrasing his book *Men and Birds*. Themelis sings the essential beauty and kindness of nature: things for him are soft, clear, and restful. There is no shadow, no inner struggle in the world: "the first form which the poet offers us, of life secure in the flesh and of the individual body, free from demons and without hell, shows the solidity of a square with its inflexible, awesome angles that deny expansion."

Pentzikis accords a numerical value of seven to each side of the square — seven are the days of the week and seven the Sages of antiquity. The size of the square is then 49 (7×7) and its perimeter 28 (7×4). The very center of the square is the point of intersection of four lines, which we trace from angle to angle (diagonal lines)

and from side to side (forming a cross), and it is this center which, according to Pentzikis, Themelis has in mind when he says "it is for you that I love the light."

This center is the pivot around which the poet traces his moods or circles of the sentimental part of his nature, his *thymikon*. The circles are two and are concentric. The smaller one is enclosed entirely in the square; it touches the square's four sides from the inside and thus excludes from itself the four angles of the square, while the other circle contains the square which it touches at the angles from the outside. In the inside circle whose ray is "the three and a half of desire" (three and a half being half the value [seven] of a side of the square) the poet exhausts his "worldly" or "earthly" self. No light or radiation can penetrate into the four corners of the square which are cut off from the circle, so that these four corners represent experiences of loneliness, lifelessness, emptiness, and darkness. The dichotomy, so painfully felt at times, between life and death is solved by the second, outer circle. This is the meta-physical circle, as it were, which embraces and illuminates both the inner circle of human sentiment and the entire square, including its dark edges:

[The poet] reflects on what is coming beyond what happens.
 . . . He sheds the old, now dead skin of the animal and garbs
 himself in the nakedness of angels . . . awful beauty of loss,
 presence of absence, expression of the mystical, ineffable and
 concealed infinite.²²

This outer circle, that of myth which defeats reason, is nevertheless an area into which Themelis and other modern Greek poets do not dare to venture. They remain confined in the ephemeral bliss of the inner circle and the square with the dark corners. Their world is at best idealistic, subject to disappointment or uncertainty. As Mallarmé said, "A throw of the dice will never abolish chance."

Many years after the writing of the review on Themelis, Seferis was also taken to task for a similar lack of nerve in Pentzikis' "Intimate Testimony about the Poet George Seferis."²² This essay, with its mock-legalistic title, strikes the only dissonant chord in a concert of praise for Seferis. Not that Pentzikis denies Seferis his

²² See chapter 3, section 8.

worth as a craftsman or serious thinker. On the contrary, he notes with appreciation the self-discipline of Seferis' work and his critical acumen. At the same time he seems to attribute to Seferis excessive pride, an exaggerated preoccupation with reason, and a fastidiousness which prevent him from communing with the rest of the world. Seferis does achieve a rhythm in his work. Pentzikis wonders, however, what will happen when this rhythm is disrupted.

Pentzikis compares Seferis' poem "An Old Man at the River Bank" with poems of others (Rimbaud, Cavafy, and Eliot) on the theme of old age. He finds that, unlike the old men in those other poems, the old man of Seferis remains unchanged after his experience of death; he does not acquire new "metaphysical" eyes: "Seferis' poetry does not end with otherworldly interests. He does not overcome anxiety by accepting ugliness." Pentzikis seems to censure in Seferis the fussy, self-corroding quality of mind that found its classical expression in Valéry's *Une Soirée avec Monsieur Teste*, which Seferis translated into Greek early in his career. The fire-walkers of Langadha, adds Pentzikis, are different. For them the world does not end in the "real" but is completed in the "surreal."

The acceptance of the "surreal" enables man to dance off the storms of life. Seferis does not dare to dance; his ego is too strong for that. "And yet," Pentzikis says, "the whole thing is no more complicated than an inoculation." The simile aptly expresses what Pentzikis has in mind. A man receiving an injection surrenders himself to a doctor or a nurse, someone outside himself. The medicine injected into his veins with the purpose of restoring him to normal health is again something that comes from the outside. It comes from revelation, as it were. Seferis' highly developed mind was also his weak spot. It was myth-proof. No myth could penetrate and wash it clean. Catharsis did not come easy to Seferis. Hence, the persistent, almost morbid pessimism that marks his poetry and critical thought.

One could challenge Pentzikis' position on Seferis. The latter's honesty of thought, thoroughness, and self-discipline are commodities most precious in a world so easily swayed by myths — all sorts of myths — of a religious, political, social, economic, and even aesthetic character. Seferis never became really arrogant in the

splendid isolation of his mind, never did he come to argue, as Cavafy had somewhat defensively argued before him, that art can be a substitute for life. Instead, he tried to reach out to other people, not only through his poetry which, though obscure, aims at the concrete image, but also through his essays. In these essays, regardless of whether he talks about Pirandello or the Greek folk-painter Theophilos, Seferis searches for the human person, the individual soul beyond the categorizings and generalizings of so many critics.

All these are valid arguments supported by the solid body of Seferis' work. Yet Pentzikis is on target when he suggests that Seferis would not surrender himself to dance, and that the orderly, Apollonian element of his nature would tend to suppress at all times the Dionysiac instinct, an instinct that gets man easily into trouble but also purges him from his internal cares.

As a literary critic Pentzikis displays an intuitive capacity to dissect and analyze the work of other writers in his effort to find the essential principles that govern their work. But true to his belief in the non-aesthetic but metaphysical, or mythical, salvation of man, he ultimately has to reject even the writers whom he most admires, if they are overly bent on rationality. Joyce is a frequent target, and to a sophisticated poet like Seferis Pentzikis prefers the simple monk or the fire-walker of Langadha. Pentzikis' attitude is similar, though antithetical in other respects, to that of D. H. Lawrence. Both writers trust the vital instincts of man and reject intellectualism and sophistication. Pentzikis seems to have traced a full circle from the mythical world of his youth through the mature years of doubt to the adoption of Tertullian's *credo quia absurdum* ("I believe because it is absurd to believe"),²³ and this inevitably colors also the ways in which he sees other writers.

6. *Pentzikis as Critic of the Arts*

A fierce Christian like Paulinus of Nola saw sin in the very look of this world: "Not only pagan literature, but the whole sensible

²³ Pentzikis commented to me, however, that the simplicity of the Athonian monks and of the fire-walkers of Langadha who keep crossing themselves signals a truth, which surpasses the intellectuality of the Tertullian statement.

appearance of things (*omnes rerum temporalium species*) is the lotus flower," he said.²⁴ On the other hand, Pentzikis reminds us that another pious man, Paulus Silentarius, used the term *ekphrasis* (expression) as title of his description of the Saint Sophia Church in Constantinople in *Toward Church-Going* (p. 115). This famous, still standing church is only one example of God's presence in the world of the concrete. Metaphysics can wed with aesthetics. The incarnation of the divine in the figure of Christ is a valid proof of that. Pentzikis accepts the world of forms and colors not only in his drawings and paintings, but also in what he says or writes in his books about the fine arts.

The fascination of Pentzikis with concrete images and visible colors as symbols of "other" realities is foreshadowed in some of the hero's actions in *Andhreas Dhimakoudhis*. Andhreas misses Renée and traces her name on a public wall, inexplicably, by drawing two vertical lines and a dot in the middle. When he feels empty, he cuts his finger with a razor blade in order to prove to himself that he exists; he needs to see a bright color, something red.

The books of Pentzikis abound in references to works of art, especially paintings. In the span of a short chapter, "Oniro ke Asthenia" (Dream and disease), from *Knowledge of Things*, he refers to a Danish painting of a moonlight scene; Byzantine mosaics and paintings that depict the Transfiguration of Christ; a cross with the inscription IC XP NK (initials of the Greek words "Jesus Christ Conquers") in the Argos medieval castle, where there is also a mural depicting hell; an icon of the Virgin; the paintings of the Greek impressionist painter Parthenis; Picasso and Della Francesca; and the painting *Abundance* of the Flemish artist Jordaens.

Pentzikis is a perceptive but casual art critic. In his review of some Hans Arp sculptures, he is concerned with the notion "memory is knowledge," with the energy which the sculptures themselves radiate from within, in contrast to the views which their creator may have about them, with volume in contrast to the titles given to the sculptures. He observes that the art of Arp may be

²⁴ Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, Vol. 61, Epist. 16.

viewed as a set of stratified archaeological remains which bear witness to the variety and succession of time periods.²⁵

As with Arp, in whose work Pentzikis finds a balance between matter and spirit, so in the case of the Greek painter Bouzianis he detects a balance between subject and object and between the background of the paintings and the human figures in them. More particularly, he finds that Bouzianis' sensualist preoccupations in his art show the value of ugliness and associate the artist with the French "damned poets."²⁶

Pentzikis will often praise the modern artists for restoring to artistic creation resources lost in Academic art. He cites with approval Cezanne's defense of impressionism, the notion that the artist has to transmit, through the depiction of natural objects and their mutability, the pulse of their duration, without intruding into the process with his logical and organized self. He also thinks highly of Picasso, who copied and recopied, like a Byzantine artist, the older masterpieces before embarking upon his own creations. Picasso, who has said that art expresses man's conception of what nature is not,²⁷ also shared Pentzikis' belief that there is no real evolution in art, no past or future, and that variations do not mean evolution. That sounds like Pentzikis' concept of memory, which lifts everything out of conventional time into the realm of an eternal present.

The timelessness of creative time is found, according to Pentzikis, not only in Byzantine and modern art, but also in primitive or folk art. Accordingly, in his review of fellow-Greek painter Spyros Papaloukas, Pentzikis tries to place the artist within the limits and discipline of Greek popular or folk tradition. He stresses the solidity, ethos, and humility of the art of Papaloukas: "He gives you the impression of a manual worker, unless you catch his blue eye where the child, unsuspecting any externality, reigns in the virginal wholeness of his own world." Pentzikis relishes enumerating the thematic

²⁵ In "O Hans Arp: Ghenikes Plirofories.—Entypossis apo Merika Ghlypta tou" (Hans Arp: General information.—Impressions from some of his sculptures), *Morphes* (July–August 1952), pp. 177–181.

²⁶ In a review of a group exhibition of paintings, in *Morphes* (April 1951), pp. 105–107.

²⁷ In John Wilson, ed., *The Faith of an Artist* (London: George Allen, 1962), p. 175.

variations in the art of Papaloukas, but warns the viewer not to see the artist as a mere landscape painter or nature-lover. Papaloukas analyzes the impressions which he receives and searches for the factors that create the beautiful; and "light is the main factor. Nothing seems to be black or can be black (which denies the light). Shadow is a color."²⁸

Papaloukas shuns individualism; his art is a social art with the house as its main symbol: "In dreams a house signifies a tomb. The tomb is the shell around the grain, it represents the resurrection of the body, which is dissolved, in an unchangeable symbolic representation, in the world of ephemeral elements." The critique goes on to describe the art of Papaloukas in a way which manages to convey an almost concrete feeling of the various paintings.

The essay by Pentzikis on Nikos Hadjikyriakos-Ghika is undoubtedly one of the most penetrating into the work of this world-known artist, who has assimilated several modern trends into his art while keeping an eye on the Greek landscape and Greek folk artistry.²⁹ Pentzikis points out the emphasis on the detail and the geometric inclinations in Ghika's art. Ghika's brave experimentations with painting style fascinate Pentzikis, who attempts to follow Ghika's hand as it moves around, explores, and solves problems.

Ghika is like Pentzikis, with a fragmented sensibility that tries and succeeds in reunifying itself in art, while Papaloukas and, to a lesser degree, Athina Shina (Pentzikis' young friend) suggest to him the unspoiled innocence of the unsophisticated mind. Both types of artists seem to him to be looking for the same thing, although they follow different methods and techniques.

7. *Pentzikis as Social Critic*

In continuing the 1978 interview I conducted with Pentzikis, a remark I made (somewhat in jest) that the emphasis which Theodoros Stoudhitis places on manual work in his religious epigrams seems to have a Marxist ring about it elicited this reaction from Pentzikis:

²⁸ "O Zographos Spyros Papaloukas" (The Painter Spyros Papaloukas), in *O Eonas mas* (December 1947), pp. 301-306.

²⁹ "O Zographos N. Hadjikyriakos-Ghikas" (The painter N. Hadjikyriakos-Ghika), *O Eonas mas* (May 1948), pp. 82-88.

P. Yes, but the difference is that the Marxist has to be proud for his work. They cannot kill in themselves the pride of the individual. Consequently they become "good" and "bad" and the former reject the latter. This is the difference. Otherwise, I would have no objection to Communism, if it could satisfy man spiritually in all his personal needs. . . .

T. Yet, there may be among them a small number of people who live their faith with such intensity, a faith which is of course betrayed in practice: we see this every day . . . cruelty, Stalinism, concentration camps . . .

P. No, no . . . let us think of the individual . . .

T. Yes, an individual, let us say, who persists in spite of everything, in the way a Christian persists, who sees that Byzantium is sinful, Byzantium also . . .

P. Well, yes. The whole world is sinful.

T. Yes, the whole world, and he [that is, the individual Marxist] goes on believing, having this vision that in the future there will be brotherhood . . .

P. He does not have such a vision.

T. . . . equality . . .

P. No, it [that is, the Church] asks you: "Are you a sinner?" You reply: "Yes, I am." — "Then, come inside the Church and find the road through which you may obtain even a hint of God's grace. And this is comfort for whatever may happen to you in your life." Do you see? While here [that is, in Marxism] you are told to act, there you may be saved even in inaction. That is why they [that is, the Christians] copy, while there [in Marxism] they want *original ideas* [mocking tone]. I recall that when the Germans withdrew from Greece, some Communists told me: "We need writers; not even 406 of them would suffice to express the things that are happening." And what were those things? One single proverb can express them [obscurity deleted]. You see?

Pentzikis misses or deliberately bypasses the point which I have tried to make on whether a Marxist, who keeps on believing in the future triumph of his ideal of social equality in spite of what his knowledge of history tells him, is not in fact like a Christian, who persists on the strength of simple faith, despite his awareness that the world is and will remain sinful. Then, the contrast which Pent-

zikis sees between the "copying" Christian and the Marxist pursuit of originality is odd. We know that the political struggle for the establishment and preservation of Marxist or so-called Marxist regimes, from Lenin to Mao Tse Tung, has been marked by the monotonous repetition of few slogans and the handling and rehandling of a few simple thoughts, meant to catch the imagination of the masses and make them operative. In other words, the typical Marxist copies his predecessors no less than the Pentzikis Christian copies his own.

Yet we must make an effort to understand what Pentzikis really means when he talks like that.

The social stand of Pentzikis, rejection of the possibility that man can succeed on his own, that is, without God, is diametrically opposite to the stand of another Greek writer, Kostas Varnalis. The latter gave himself wholeheartedly, in his middle age, to Marxism for reasons, in the present writer's view, similar to those for which Pentzikis espoused and affirmed the faith of the simple Christian: the need to reach mankind at large and also make a name for himself in an area where he would have less competition from others. But eccentricity is the lesser motive in Pentzikis' orientation toward a metaphysical rather than political, sociological, or aesthetic apprehension of life. His ideal state is Byzantium,³⁰ but it is a mythical rather than a historical Byzantium. It is a religious but not theocratic state, in the sense of a strong and dogmatic church that regulates or strongly influences the governance of the community.

It seems, in fact, that the conservatism of Pentzikis is a liberalism in religious garb. When it comes to contemporary politics, Pentzikis does not take sides and has never declared absolute faith in one or other of the Greek governments which he has seen in his time, nor has he viewed the kings of the Hellenes in the same light in which he views those of his mythical Byzantium. His attention to Constantine Caramanlis, whom he painted under the circumstances described earlier, is not a partisan act. In Caramanlis he saw an essentially honest man who took seriously his role as father of his country, a fellow-Greek from Macedonia, whose family had made

³⁰ An analogy may be found in Yeats's poem "Byzantium," which, however, Pentzikis has not read.

sacrifices in the struggle for the liberation of northern Greece, and one who was unjustly criticized by those that claimed superiority over him on purely human terms.

Filing Cabinet abounds in descriptions of war and other acts of violence, and echoes of the political upheavals of our times. Yet Pentzikis makes no appeal for human or political rights, the main concern of modern-day liberals. At the Panhellenic Congress of Writers, Pentzikis remarked that freedom and slavery are relative things, that "freedom in man is a case of myth."³¹ People like Solzhenitsyn, who appeal for the liberalization of their country on purely human and social terms, from the point of view of the educated man of the West, tend to bother Pentzikis.³² We understand this better if we recall that Pentzikis denies that the individual man — cornerstone of liberal and democratic thought — can stand alone on his own two feet without sustenance from some external cause, which for him is God. Modern man, he adds, must learn again to die with joy and in proud deprivation. This is the sole kind of pride permitted him.

This attitude is peculiar to many and strongly negative to some, but Pentzikis can defend it on several grounds. He can point out the emptiness and purposeless existence of whole segments of modern society — the world depicted, for instance, in the plays of Edward Albee — which stresses the gratification, material or otherwise, of the individual. He can also direct attention to the violence that has accompanied modern wars of liberation, undertaken on purely economic, racial, and social grounds; in other words, on reasonable or what are called reasonable grounds.

Such experiences make Pentzikis suspicious of man's pride in the authority of his mind, as they have affected Eliot and Borges in their own social attitudes. In the case of Pentzikis and Eliot, we notice that both men are neo-Christians. Both return to Christianity through the purgatorial paths of modern life, with the difference that while Eliot is a High Anglican and represents the mysticism of

³¹ *Proceedings of the Panhellenic Congress of Writers*, p. 196.

³² It may be worth noting here that, similarly to several American writers and artists who joined the Communist party during and after the Second World War in recognition of the Soviet contribution to the struggle against Nazi Germany, Pentzikis accepted Communism briefly in 1943 when Stalin allowed Russian churches to function again with some freedom.

the West, Pentzikis espouses the mysticism of the East and particularly its naive or popular kind. And both have seen in the artistic revolution of the last one hundred years or so a healthy reaction, existentialist in nature, against Positivism, that train of thought which originated, according to Pentzikis, in the Renaissance and was given a new impetus by the French Revolution. Marxism is the natural outcome of these individual-centered trends in the development of the West, and it is in the light of such considerations that we should read Pentzikis' contrast between the "copying" Christian, bound by tradition, and the arrogant Marxist pursuing illusions of novelty, "originality," as Pentzikis has put it.

It is true that Pentzikis seems occasionally to go too far, as, for example, when he claims that the bulk of the Greek people accepted their four hundred years of slavery to the less civilized Turks willingly, for the purificatory character of this slavery and for the sake of preserving their faith. In this he makes a virtue of necessity. He also explains, rather oddly, the prosperity of the rocky island of Hydra at the time of the Greek War of Independence as a direct product of its population's faith, visible in the numerous churches and chapels of the island. A more credible explanation of this multitude of churches would be to see them as proof of a material prosperity achieved by the hard-working Hydrions through a successful sea trade.

Human reason, whatever its limitations, may still be the main hope for humankind. I believe that it is. I feel, however, that humanism should be large enough to accommodate the whole world, including Pentzikis. After all, Pentzikis is, deeper in, a liberal person who accepts humankind with its contradictions, sorrows, angers, regrets and repentance and sees in a person a being who eats and drinks and reaches out to the world, who fears and shuns abstractions or coercions, who enjoys looking at pictures and telling stories. In other words, Pentzikis has a realistic view of people and of the world. Yet he wants a sanction for this view from above, from God.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

In our modern, cosmopolitan world, where cities are becoming more and more impersonal, Nikos Gabriel Pentzikis is one of a few writers who have come to reaffirm the importance of one's ties with his native land and, more particularly, his native city. The varied and colorful history of Thessaloniki appears to be synopsized in the work of Pentzikis, a work that combines strong interests in the concrete world and in the achievements of the human intellect.

The two patron Saints of Thessaloniki, Demetrius (the Roman officer converted to Christianity) and Gregory Palamas (the Byzantine prince who elected to live the monastic life) embody the idealistic fervor of youth with the wisdom of old age, both of which elements are found in the work of Pentzikis. One could also say that another Thessalonian, the commentator on the epics of Homer, named Efstathios, finds a worthy successor in Pentzikis, since the latter is inclined to comment or inform his readers copiously about things of the past.

The early Pentzikis emerged naturally out of the intellectual climate that nourished most of the Greek writers who started publishing in the thirties and were concerned with reinterpreting Greek realities and traditions through the use of new writing techniques imported from Western Europe. The main hero of Pentzikis' first book, Andhreas Dhimakoudhis — largely a *persona* of the writer himself — is a young man attached emotionally to his land, but suffering from the pangs of first love in a Western European capital. His death prefigures and underlies the decisive turn of Pentzikis to the Greek Orthodox faith and the national traditions of Greece, a theme which Pentzikis reworks in a new fashion in *The Dead Man and the Resurrection*.

Religious and Greek folk values become the axis of Pentzikis'

thought and feeling. Yet his interest in non-Greek writers like Joyce continues and results in select translations and essays printed in *Koblias* and other journals. His paintings extend his urge to conquer and make the surrounding world his own. The first creative period of Pentzikis is a time of great uncertainties and emotional upheavals, professional disappointments and failures in the area of human relations. His style of writing, anxious and discursive, reaches a point of crisis in the almost desperate impersonality of *Knowledge of Things*.

In the fifties, Pentzikis finds himself happily married, successful professionally, and productive in writing and painting. He appears more confident of himself as a Thessalonian and a devotee of the Greek Orthodox faith. Yet, deeper in, Pentzikis is still an anxious searcher for both existential and objective realities. *Architecture of the Scattered Life* justifies its title, as it shows Pentzikis' effort, successful to a considerable degree, to structure the data of his memory and current life, harness the flow of time and give it meaning.

With regard to painting, Pentzikis grows more confident that Byzantine painting, which had been considered a static art, has much to teach the modern artist. He eventually develops the view that art should not try to capture the beautiful, but reflect the true and holy. The words-and-numbers method which he espouses in his work is his way of ensuring that, both as a painter and a writer, he is not carried away by purely aesthetic notions, but that he relies on the will and the grace of God, whose hand governs all phenomena.

The Novel of Mrs. Ersi forms a climax in Pentzikis' mythopoeic writing. Here he loses and finds himself in the plots and subplots of an imaginative reworking of someone else's story, after which there is a return to a stricter handling of reality with *Notes of One Hundred Days*.

In the late sixties and through the seventies, Pentzikis becomes absorbed in reediting, correcting, and broadening his written work. His compulsive urge to tidy and set things and memories in order is amply evident in the formidable *Filing Cabinet*. He also continues to paint on a resolutely religious basis and shows readiness to talk to people and expound on the ways in which he sees the world.

Looking at the work of Pentzikis from various angles, one is

struck by the versatility of his spirit around a solid nucleus of faith. Pentzikis believes in myth, yet he rejects abstractions. He stresses the value of memory, which helps man integrate his fragmentary experiences into a meaningful whole and recapture a lost Eden. Writing is one way of making memory work, but it is no easier than a pregnancy followed by the labor of birth. Pentzikis abnegates the value of writing for purely literary purposes. Writing must be as large as life. Hence, Pentzikis' sources are numerous and varied. Among those of special interest are the Greek folk traditions, religious and secular, as well as botany, a science which Pentzikis studied professionally.

Conservative though he is, Pentzikis has not been insensitive to the modern media of communication such as films, radio, and television, whose influence can be detected in the very style of his writing. The playful element in Pentzikis' style may be due partly to that influence, but its origin is in his religious sources and in his conviction that faith in God need not be gloomy. The puns which Pentzikis so much likes are meant, like his numerology, to establish a direct contact among the various levels of reality and help him and his readers to break the limitations of rational thought.

Pentzikis often avoids the lyrical element in his writing, for, as he says, he is suspicious of sentiments that carry him away. Being sentimental by nature, however, he cannot suppress entirely his more "poetic self," which surfaces now and then in passages of great beauty and imagination. Remarkable also, from an aesthetic point of view, are many of Pentzikis' metaphors. In general, the literary "lapses" of Pentzikis are sanctioned by his belief in the concrete representation of divine reality.

The speaker Pentzikis is consistent with the writer Pentzikis. Transcripts of interviews which he has given read like parts of his books. This shows the essential unity of his mind.

The personality of Pentzikis, his vision of life, and his writing style become apparent also through an examination of his work vis-à-vis the work of other writers, Greek and non-Greek. Joyce has impressed Pentzikis considerably, while Pentzikis' style also recalls the French and American writers of the "new novel," their stream-of-consciousness manner and use of intertextual structures. In some respects Pentzikis is also similar to Jorge Luis Borges, who

has identified himself with his city, Buenos Aires, while he keeps his eyes open to the world at large.

Of Greek writers, apart from the Fathers of the Church and the Byzantine chronographers, Pentzikis shows affinities with some moderns who stressed native Greek traditions over the values of the West. He is also connected with many of his contemporaries who welcomed the importation and assimilation of writing techniques and new modes of looking at life from the West. With the latter Pentzikis has taken part in publishing ventures and many private and public colloquia, but eventually he followed a road of his own. The younger generation of Thessalonian writers seems to have taken notice of Pentzikis and in some cases to have borrowed specific motifs from his work. Greek critics have on the whole been hostile to the works of Pentzikis. A few have shown considerable appreciation and tried to discuss and place him within the frame of modern literature.

Pentzikis' own views about other writers and literature in general are voiced in essays and random comments made in his books. The idea that underlies many of his pronouncements on these matters is that writing is ultimately an act of grace rather than the result of deliberate effort on the part of the writer.

Of non-Greek writers, Mallarmé inspired Pentzikis to write an essay, which is both a perspicacious treatment of the work of Mallarmé and an attempt at overcoming Mallarmé's charm. Pentzikis also wrote sharp essays on his fellow-Greek poets Themelis and Seferis.

Pentzikis is intuitive rather than methodical in his criticism of other artists, mainly painters. He values the metaphysical aspect of the works of art, but also takes delight in their concrete appearance. He considers Byzantine painting as the acme in the history of art, but also believes that modern experiments in painting and sculpture deserve attention, as they manifest the existential anxiety and spiritual thirst of modern society.

On political and social matters Pentzikis will strike some as a reactionary or enemy of progress, but this is a false impression. His over-all stand on society reflects his experience of people as creatures who are easily deluded in the effort to reach or create a better society on the basis of human reason alone. To an existence of

emptiness or cynicism or political expediency, he prefers one of creative myth and has chosen for himself the role of the simple Greek Orthodox Christian.

Graham Greene has defined his life as moments of faith diversified by doubt and moments of doubt diversified by faith. The restless spirit of Nikos Gabriel Pentzikis follows a similar rhythm, up into the realm of myth and down into the world of doubt and despair, the world of perishable things, which he rediscovers and reembraces only in the light of myth. Thus, for Pentzikis a human being is both insignificant, a particle of dust or a "garbage can," but also a vehicle of memory and a reflection of the Godhead. In short, the life and work of Nikos Gabriel Pentzikis reaffirms belief in the mystery and essential worth of creation.

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